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Market Success of the Serial Killer Genre: The Implications of America's Morbid Fascination

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HONORS THESIS

Certificate of Approval

Market Success of the Serial Killer Genre:
The Implications of America's Morbid Fascination

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Approved to fulfill the
requirement of HON 437

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Abstract

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Arguably since the end of the twentieth century, serial killers (both real and fictional) have been at the top of public interest in American society. The names Hannibal Lector, Jeffrey Dahmer, and Ted Bundy are as well-known as most A-list celebrities in pop culture. Gruesome and telling cinematic films, television shows, novels, and documentaries have all seen enormous successes, and it seems the masses cannot get enough. The prolonged prosperity of this peculiar market brings up a lot of interesting questions about the origins of its success, including what has started this obsession, and what exactly it is about serial killers that scares us. From a marketing perspective, it's beneficial to recognize the root of these fears in order to better understand the mindset of the public. Furthermore, by evaluating American's current consumption habits - particularly, the practice of binge-watching - we get a glimpse into this culture's priorities, and how these priorities may link back to its serial killer fascination.

Introduction

In recent decades, serial killers have received substantial exposure in both media and entertainment outlets. It seems the entire nation has developed a curiosity about the most violent criminals, and turns to film, television, novels, and documentaries to feed that curiosity. The continued success of this peculiar market brings up a lot of interesting questions about the origins of its success.

The main question seems to be this: Why are people so interested in the serial killer, and what does this interest suggest about American consumers?

In order to answer that question, it's essential to first define who exactly qualifies as a "serial killer". The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) defines a serial killer as someone who has killed three or more people, with a cooling-off period between each murder (Morton, 2005). This time lapse between murders is pivotal because it differentiates serial killers from mass or spree killers, who commit multiple murders in one event. Furthermore, the serial killers discussed in this paper – both real and fictional – could all reasonably exist in American society. While horror movie characters such as Freddy Krueger and Jason Voorhees technically fit the definition of a serial killer, this type of fictional villain isn't someone that could feasibly exist in reality. However, more realistic fictional serial killers such as Patrick Bateman or Hannibal Lecter could sensibly fit into society.

After defining the serial killer, it's important to begin by understanding what initially formed the modern archetype of the serial killer. Although violence and murder have existed as long as humans have, public interest in serial killers is a relatively new phenomenon that grew

around the 1980's (Haggerty, 2009). From a marketing standpoint, it's valuable to become familiar with this phenomenon and understand exactly what it is about serial killers that's keeping people hooked. This understanding reveals the mindset of target consumers and common perceptions of violent crime and criminals in society. In this thesis, I will explore the genesis of the fear of serial murderers and how this terror further solidified into a national sensation. To do so, I will be referencing various fictional and real serial killers throughout this paper; there is a detailed table available in the appendix for clarification (Table 1).

Next, I will describe the traits that are generally associated with serial killers, and how the public uses both fictional and real serial killers to further strengthen this persona. Because it's so hard to fathom that human beings could have the potential to commit heinous, violent crime, the public develops a checklist of tell-tale signs that set serial killers apart from the general masses. From a marketing perspective, this checklist helps to develop better insight into the expectations and mentality of the masses.

Finally, I will be delving into American society's modern consumption practices, with a focus on the concept of binge-watching. The consumption methods of American culture help to shape and define its society; this impression, however, includes the negative aspects of binge-watching, and the significance that they may hold in regards to the serial killer phenomenon.

Overall, I would like to look at what fueled the initial interest in serial killers, understand the traits associated with these criminals, and contemplate how the modern persona of the serial killer may reflect the behavior of American society.

A Killer Among Us: The Origin of Fear

Serial killers are a major topic of interest both in true crime coverage and in the entertainment industry. The high frequency of this narrative may lead us to believe that serial killing has become a serious epidemic in this country in the past few decades, but statistically people are much, much more likely to be murdered by a friend or family member (Surette, 2002). Serial killing is so much of a rarity, in fact, that it only accounts for about 1% of total annual murders in the United States, and the average American's chances of falling victim to a serial killer hover just slightly above zero (Lee & DeHart, 2007). And yet, although serial killing is such a rare occurrence, this crime tends to be at the forefront of consumed media.

Analyzing the time period in which the serial killer genre exploded may give us key clues as to how this specific genre was so prominent. Although the existence and fear of serial killers came to be centuries ago, the beginning of pop culture's explosive serial killer fascination took hold in the 1980s (Murley, 2008). In the '80s, life for the average American was improving dramatically. The recession was ending, Reagan's neoliberal economy was thriving, and most external threats to the nation were subsiding (Donnelly, 2012). However, with no established common enemy, Americans no longer had a known entity to fear, which left many with feelings of unease in their otherwise safe and comfortable lives. When a group of people have a common enemy (no matter how legitimate that enemy's threat may actually be), this enemy provides them with an opportunity to band together against a definitive focal point to direct their negativity and place blame (Donnelly, 2012). It's possible that, because Americans no longer had many substantial threats to their livelihood, they began to fixate on and emphasize the impact of the serial killer. The 1980s saw a spike in horror films, with the villain of the story commonly painted as a wicked murderer wreaking havoc on innocent, unsuspecting victims. This archetype

gave the average American citizen a “superficial scapegoat” to direct blame towards (Donnelly, 2012). There was once again an external source to be feared, and blame can be placed on this societal deviant.

The History of Death in American Society

Murder and death aren't new concepts to American civilization; in fact, death and execution have been historic staples to American society. The very origin of this nation came to be because of the execution of Native Americans by the thousands in the quest for land. Consider the Salem witch trials, where those suspected of witchcraft were publicly hanged, and their deaths and executors were celebrated. Murder is not new to American civilization, however serial killings have seen to have gained more and more public attention in recent decades (Jarvis, 2007). If death has always been somewhat commonplace in American culture, why are serial killers just now receiving attention as a threat to society? It's reasonable to consider that those with inner tendencies of violence have had appropriate outlets in the past (Vronsky, 2004). In the 17th and 18th centuries, the death penalty was the preferred method of treatment for most serious crimes. The public would witness the executions - often hangings - and there was a lack of humanity to the process (Banner, 2009). When there was a significant societal need for executioners, those interested in killing may have been drawn to these positions and been able to fulfill their urges in appropriate outlets without drawing attention or scrutiny from the public (Vronsky, 2004). However, once the death penalty became more politicized in the 1970s, the entire practice of criminal execution drastically changed. Death is now brought on neatly and quickly by a doctor, and the execution isn't made into a public spectacle. Because there is no longer a significant need for frequent execution in today's society, and American culture has

become safer and sterilized, the behavior of serial killers now stands out as extremely deviant and immoral.

As mentioned above, the most dangerous criminals are still sentenced to the death penalty in today's society. Public support for the death penalty actually reached its peak during the '80s and '90s, which parallels the rise of the public's serial killer fascination (see Table 2). During this period in history, serial killers were highly covered by news outlets; if the public automatically envisioned a sadistic, psychopathic serial murderer whenever they thought of a criminal on death row, it's no wonder that they were in heavy support of the death penalty. It seems that, throughout history, the masses have allowed their perceptions of the prevalence of shocking, violent crime in society to dictate their opinions towards capital punishment.

Threat to Suburbia: How Serial Killers Taint the Perfect American Life

It has now been established that serial killers have become increasingly deviant in the public eye, but what exactly is it about the modern-day serial killer persona that poses a threat? Many Americans now have such comfortable, stable lives, so what is there to worry about? Perhaps the serial killer can take this presumed safety away. There may be an underlying feeling that peak comfort in life has now been attained, and a deviant, conflicting force such as a serial killer could come in and disrupt this recently-attained stability. It's unsettling to consider that, even after seemingly maximum stability is achieved in life, there are still forces capable of destroying us. If society has truly been built up to a healthy state, then how is there so much evil hidden in the shadows? Perhaps American life isn't quite as untouchable as it seems, and the serial killer is lurking in the background, ready to unravel this illusion (Murley, 2008).

An aspect that signifies America's perfect, shining lives and solidifies it into a national reality is American suburbia. Suburbia is the symbol of community and the ideal domestic household. It's where families are raised and traditional American values are practiced, shared, and celebrated. The serial killer figure is the antithesis of suburbia; he or she is generally portrayed as a loner, an outsider, a destroyer of value. Simply put, the serial killer is a direct threat to suburbia (Caputi, 1990). This character enters the community uninvited, targets victims that seemingly represent the average, innocent citizen, and dismantles the neighborhood to its core. The serial killer, as painted in today's context, is a threat to the ideal American family and community.

Dismantled Establishment

Along with the fear of losing personal and community stability is the fear of established society as a whole deteriorating. The serial killer is the enemy because he or she is an evil being that disrupts the status quo and harvests chaos. Modern American society believed to be a generally organized, law-abiding body, and those who threaten this order with lawlessness and hostility are the enemy (Lee & DeHart, 2007). Many have begun to take the security of modern civilization for granted; the thought of a serial killer having the capability to disrupt this reliable system of safety is terrifying. Violence confronts the established law of society and threatens to overturn stability and implement chaos in its place (Lea, 2014). The persona of the serial killer provokes the fear of total collapse of society and order.

Understanding the fear of the American people, and what exactly it is that they're afraid of losing, gives a glimpse into the mindset of the public. A marketer can benefit from learning more about the American public's fears of serial killers. By identifying the roots of this fear –

even those that are distorted – marketers can develop a clearer insight into what their audiences pay attention to. Many viewpoints in the past few decades have been especially shaped by media and entertainment coverage; this knowledge can help marketers understand where the masses are acquiring information, and how it's consequently shaping their thoughts and actions. With this understanding, marketers can recognize where messages are most effectively heard and better reach audiences through these same outlets.

Law of Opposites: Skewed Perceptions of Violent Crime

Since the emergence of serial killers in both true crime and fictional entertainment, the coverage of serial killers in the media has tended to skew many people's perceptions of this particular crime. Because this class of criminals is so rare, and their crimes are often so gruesome, they tend to dominate the news when they become known. This occurrence is known as the "law of opposites", where violent crime receives much more media coverage than lesser, more common crimes such as larceny-theft (Surette. 2002). While the latter happens much more frequently, the public is more enthralled by the details of violent, offensive crimes, plus true crime offers essentially free entertainment content to cover, so these stories are what the media tends to deliver to the masses.

The rare nature of serial killing is what makes it such a hot commodity in both media coverage and fictional accounts. If these heinous crimes were more commonplace, there wouldn't be such an urgency to cover them heavily and in detail. But when stories about serial killers do become known, the media tends to cover them to a point of over-saturation, ultimately skewing the public's perceptions about the frequency of this crime. Although serial killing is a rare occurrence, the disproportionate coverage in the news leads people to believe otherwise.

This explains the paradox that, as violent crime rates fall in society, the public's concerns about crime simultaneously rise (Surette, 2002). Because the media so heavily covers serial killers, and the public follows by consuming said media in great amounts, this crime becomes higher and higher on the list of social concerns. The entertainment industry follows suit with this practice by jam-packing much of prime-time television with crime and murder (Murley, 2008). The rarity of violence makes it intriguing, yet when violent crime is watched day after day, it becomes engrained in daily life. With all of this exposure to depictions of murder, many begin to believe that there is a serious serial killer phenomenon in modern America, which simply isn't true to the extent it may seem.

Death-Denying Culture

For a relatively safe society, many people seem to be addicted to consuming news and entertainment about violence and murder. In fact, many Americans seem to fear death, so much so that they have been dubbed as having a "death-denying culture" (Durkin, 2003). America has seen many medical, scientific, and technological improvements in its citizens' ways of life over the last few decades. Because of these advances, most Americans don't have a firsthand familiarity or direct experiences with death, especially death brought on by extreme or unusual circumstance. Death is not a common topic of discussion, and yet it is something that quite literally *everyone* will experience; this leaves people searching for answers anywhere they can find them. The unease of impending death can be alleviated somewhat by consuming stories of murders and violent crime that are available in the media. Death is such a taboo topic in everyday conversation that pop-culture and media depictions of death often provide the public with most of their insight on the process of death. While these sensationalized examples may not

be the most realistic representation of death, it's one way to learn more about a topic that is often avoided in this culture.

Recipe for Disaster: The Tell-Tale Signs of a Killer

Serial killers are considered the enemy of American society because they're generally the opposite of what is expected in modern culture. They don't behave socially in the way that a "normal" person is expected to. A good example of this archetype is Edmund Kemper, a Californian serial killer and necrophiliac from the 1970s. Kemper, aka "The Co-Ed Killer", was an unusually large man who struggled to fit in from an early age. He had a troubled childhood, spent significant time in a psychiatric hospital, displayed many early traits of a serial killer, and by the age of 15, Kemper began his career of murder and necrophilia. Some of his victims include family members, while others were young female hitchhikers. In 1973, Kemper was charged with eight counts of first degree murder and is currently serving eight consecutive life sentences (LaBrode, 2007). When most people think of a serial killer, this is the general image that comes to mind: an anti-social, isolated outsider.

This commonly-held idea of the serial killer persona is usually what is thought of as the enemy of society, but there are also serial murderers who have masterfully blended into society. Many believe that they could identify the telltale signs of a psychopath or a killer, yet many actual serial killers were only convicted after years of successfully evading the public and law enforcement. While serial killers threaten us with the possibility of creating chaos and disorder, many are able to do so because they have the ability to blend into society and generally go unnoticed. A classic example is Ted Bundy, a serial killer from the 1970's who murdered dozens of young, white women. While Bundy was a serial killer, he was also a psychology graduate, law

student, and political activist. He's often described as an "all-American boy" who was handsome and intelligent (Caputi, 1990). Of course, after delving into Bundy's private life, more telling signs of his true nature reveal themselves, but on the surface, and especially to the public, those signs were hidden. It was hard for the masses to look at Bundy and believe he could be capable of such heinous acts because he appeared to be a normal guy. Once it's understood that a seemingly-normal person could be capable of such monstrous acts, it suggests that that kind of evil could be nestled inside any person encountered in the street.

Know Thyself

Perhaps even scarier than the thought of a passing stranger having the capacity to murder is the idea that we may already know someone who is capable of killing, or that that person may even be ourselves. In order to pacify that fear, many look to both fictional and real serial killers for key elements that led to their killings, and make sure that those same warning signs don't appear in others or within ourselves. Perhaps this killer had a traumatic upbringing, and that's what has shaped him or her into someone capable of committing their crimes. Or maybe this killer has been a cold psychopath from the very beginning, and has had these deep-rooted macabre urges within them their whole life. Although neither of these conditions – either separately or in combination - guarantees to breed a serial killer, the mix of the two is known to produce someone with violent tendencies (Vronsky, 2004). Either way, that nature/nurture combination that has created a killer can help make sense of their motives and reassure the "normal" citizens that they're in the clear because they don't relate. Furthermore, these sought-after signs are beneficial to know when delivering anything serial killer-related to the public; those in the entertainment and news industries can better target their audiences if they know exactly what it is that audiences are looking for.

Signs of Nurture: A Troubled Childhood

After identifying certain telltale signs of a serial killer, it's sometimes even possible to begin feeling sympathy or justification for their actions. For example, in the television show *Dexter*, the main character lives a normal life by day, and kills by night. Normally his behavior would be condemned, but once it becomes known that that Dexter Morgan had witnessed his mother's brutal murder at a young age, and only targets other killers and criminals, viewers kind of end up rooting for him (Donnelly, 2012). He has certain extenuating circumstances that have bred him into a serial killer, and once that is understood, he becomes less of a monster and more of a victim of tragedy.

A real-life parallel to Dexter's fictitious story is the upbringing of Aileen Wuornos. Wuornos was a Floridian prostitute arrested in the '90s for murdering seven men, and is often referred to as "America's first female serial killer" (Schilt, 2000). Originally viewed as a man hater, Wuornos's crimes were viewed as calculated and inhumane. However, when her childhood is taken into account, it becomes clear that she may have been doomed to this life of violent crime. Wuornos is often described as "white trash," growing up in a toxic home environment and falling victim to rape and abuse at a young age, which continued consistently into adulthood. Being surrounded by toxicity her entire life, it becomes less of a mystery how this woman was capable of serial murder. Of course, Aileen's crimes are harder to forgive than Dexter's because she is an actual person who committed actual murders, but it's still pretty clear to see how she may have such severe anger and violence rooted within her. Many cannot imagine having the capacity to commit serial murders, so considering these instances of serial

killers with troubled upbringings helps to rationalize their behavior and eases conflicting feelings towards them.

Signs of Nature: Psychopathic Behavior

Along with external trauma throughout early development, another telltale sign of serial killing is an internal mental state: psychopathy. Current psychology has recently updated this term to antisocial personality disorder, but for familiarity sake, this paper will still refer to the condition as psychopathy. Someone with this condition will often be extremely self-interested, and incapable of socializing properly, loving, or feeling guilt. Beyond the emotional indications of psychopathy, the behavioral trifecta of psychopathic behavior in an adolescent is bedwetting, fire-starting, and cruelty towards animals (Anderson, 1994). With little care for others or possible repercussions, psychopaths with violent tendencies will continue to escalate their behaviors in order to fulfill their urges.

A fictional example of a psychopathic serial killer is *The Silence of the Lambs*' Hannibal Lecter. In this book and movie series, Lecter is a brilliant psychiatric doctor who also happens to be a serial murderer and cannibal (which is why he's commonly referred to as "Hannibal the Cannibal"). While he is intelligent and well-mannered, Lecter also displays a lot of psychopathic traits, such as manipulation, superficial charm, and lack of remorse for his victims (DeLisi, Vaughn, Beaver, & Wright 2010). These qualities make Hannibal Lecter terrifying to us because he's able to commit unthinkable crimes without feeling the least bit guilty about his actions.

A similar example of a psychopathic serial killer found in true crime is Kansas's Dennis Rader, or BTK (a nickname he gave himself, which stands for "Bind, Torture, and Kill").

Throughout a span of twenty years, Rader tortured and murdered both a family and many young

women. A defining aspect of Rader's behavior was the fact that he enjoyed taunting the police; he would change his victim selection, space out his killings, and send in various messages and confessions into local media outlets (Hickey, 2013). His narcissism and unwavering pride in his own murders is what ultimately led to his arrest and conviction, but are also signs that Rader was a psychopath.

The good news is that if you're spending time worrying about whether or not you may be a psychopath, you probably aren't one. Those with the ability to feel guilt and empathy for others don't fall into the 'psychopath' category. Much like pinpointing tragedy in the lives of some killers, diagnosing other known serial killers as having psychopathic tendencies is another strategy to distinguish "normal" people from the "otherness" of serial killers.

Binge Nation

As a nation, the fascination in serial killers remains strong, but the way people consume media about them - and in general - continues to vary. As technology and culture evolves, so do consumption practices, and if marketers want to remain competitive and appealing, they must evolve along with society.

One practice that is becoming more and more popular in entertainment consumption is binge-watching. The word "binge" is no longer exclusively attached to negative practices of over-eating, -drinking, or other types of hyper-consumption that are destructive to the body. "Binge-watching" - a term that has become increasingly popular and well-understood in America over the last ten years - is the exercise of watching four or more consecutive episodes of a television show in one sitting, usually through a streaming service (Pierce-Grove, 2016). This consumption practice has become more popular and achievable through the growth of streaming

services such as Netflix and Hulu, which provide entire seasons or series of television shows, as opposed to regularly aired TV shows which usually air just once a week. With ample archives ready at their fingertips, consumers now have the ability to watch what they want, when they want to, without being constrained by scheduled programming or frequent commercial breaks.

Not only is binge-watching changing the way content is consumed, but it's also changing the way content is created; many entertainment producers are recognizing this new trend and creating content specifically to be consumed by binge-watching. Many Netflix Original shows are being created quickly, broken up into short seasons and released all at once, so viewers can binge the content at whatever time and rate they please. Critics of this new production method say that content begins to have less quality as the focus shifts to speed and quantity, but consumers don't seem to mind much. By creating a bingeable show, there is less pressure to create content that viewers will commit to coming back to week-after-week, sometimes over the span of years. Offering something that can be consumed in just a few lengthy binges still feels like an achievement, but doesn't require nearly as much long-term viewer commitment (Pierce-Grove, 2016). There are some new, added benefits to this new binge-watch culture. More niche shows have a chance of success because they don't have pressures to maintain consistently high television viewings and ratings. Bingeable shows also have more flexibility to stretch out a story as opposed to its traditionally-aired counterpart. When viewers sit down to watch their one weekly episode of a programmed show, they expect to see a lot of action at once. However, with a bingeable show, each episode can go more in-depth with a show's plot and elaborate storylines because more of the story will be consumed at once, meaning the action can build methodically over one sitting (Pierce-Grove, 2016). Shows made in this fashion tend to lure viewers into

watching many more episodes in one sitting than with traditional TV because they strive to consume the entire storyline at once.

Excessive Consumption

Bingeing has become a popular practice in America far beyond just the scope of television consumption. Modern American culture has become increasingly consumed by consumption; the desire to own the newest, shiniest, biggest new thing has become top priority, and success and happiness are measured by possessions. Some hyper-consumption has become so extreme that it is leading to destructive ends. Polluted waters, ravaged non-renewable resources, and increased waste are all side effects to a society that wants more, more, more (Jarvis, 2007). The need to constantly consume more tends to overpower and overshadow the negative consequences of hyper-consumption.

It's interesting that binge-watching, as well as hyper-consumption in general, has become increasingly popular in today's society because it peculiarly mirrors the characteristics that many so often look down upon in serial killers. In the act of extreme bingeing, it's common to succumb to internal urges and neglect societal duties. While it's possible to binge in moderation without making significant life changes, bingeing to the point of abandoning healthy lifestyle practices, or missing work or social functions, crosses the line of being considered socially acceptable. Similarly, serial killers allow themselves to be controlled by their urges, often due to the surrender of self-control and abandonment of societal responsibilities and expectations (Pierce-Grove, 2016). Even more so, serial killers give in to their inner temptations and commit acts that not only abandon their societal duties, but go against society's established order, making themselves social deviants. The expectation is that excessive consumption (whether it be of

television, products, or victims) will lead to satisfaction and happiness; the pursuit of this feeling leads to the selfish abandonment of responsibility and societal commitments.

Intent to Consume

Another comparison between binge-watching in particular and serial killing is the offender's intent, and the guilt associated with it. Often times, one will sit down with the premeditated intention of binge-watching a television show. Consumers will set aside a certain amount of time and "marathon" their designated episodes (Pierce-Grove, 2016). Similarly, some serial killers are very calculated and organized in their crimes, mapping out victims and details in plenty of time leading up to the actual murder. In both of these instances, the person committing their respective hyper-consumption feel that they are in control of their habit. On the flipside of intentional marathon-ing is accidental binge-watching. In this case, the television viewer sits down with the plan of only watching one or two shows, but gets "sucked in" by the show and consumes much more than originally planned. The consumer in this instance usually feels guilty because they wasted their time and allowed themselves to fall down the rabbit hole of unintended binge-watching. In comparison to serial killers, this practice would be akin to a killer who commits an unplanned murder on impulse, whether it be out of anger, passion, or an insatiable urge. As opposed to committing a more calculated crime, this act is disorganized and usually much more chaotic, giving the killer a sense of disorder. While the serial killer most likely won't feel guilt towards his or her victim, they will probably feel that they are losing control over themselves or their urges to kill (Anderson, 1994).

We Are What We Consume

A strange intersection of hyper-consumption occurs when the public consumes stories about serial killers. Books, movies, television shows, and documentaries about serial murderers continue to prosper in the entertainment industry. Some people even go so far as to collect “murderabilia,” or merchandise that is somehow related to known serial killers. Fanatics are willing to pay top dollar to own art created by convicted murderers, crime scene material, or killer-theme merchandise (Jarvis, 2007). It starts to turn into a tangle of consumers consuming belongings of criminal consumers. My suspicion is that most of these people don’t consciously see a connection between their excessive consumption practices and those of the serial killers they’re interested in. The public either completely unaware of these parallels, or the recognition is so deep-down that it’s not troubling on the surface.

As mentioned above, the narrative of the serial killer has risen dramatically over the past few decades, regardless of the minimal to non-existent nature of their actual threat to society. Maybe this monster has been created and emphasized to fear because it reflects the evils of America’s modern society. Perhaps the serial killer has become a metaphor for what has been recently prioritized in this culture; they reflect society’s hyper-consumption habits. The destructive, life-consuming practices of hyper-consumption that have continued to escalate in American culture are indirectly but radically mirrored back in tales of serial killers, and that reflected image is terrifying. Serial killers tend to seem disgusting because they turn against societal norms by following their dark internal urges. But what if any “normal” person would do the same thing if they truly abandoned their responsibilities and followed their deep desires?

For a marketer, this deep-seated link between serial killers and hyper-consumption in America reveals part of the public's subconscious. This realization not only highlights how excessive bingeing could have negative effects, but also sheds light on why so many Americans are simultaneously captivated and repulsed by serial killers. Outlooks become complicated when these violent criminals begin to display similar characteristics to American consumers. For those who market entertainment or news to the public, this connection could help to better portray serial killers to the American masses. And for marketers in general, it's essential to understand that modern society's enemy is a hyperbolic version of itself; this idea suggests that, as American society shifts and grows, so may the perceived enemy of society.

Conclusion

Despite their minimal threat to American society, serial killers have continued to receive disproportionate coverage in both the news and entertainment since the 1980s. This narrative generally paints the serial killer as a deviant outsider with the potential to threaten comfortable lifestyle and dismantle the orderly, established society. As a marketer, it's valuable to recognize the root of these fears in order to better understand the public's perspective. Likewise, it's beneficial to know what consumers seek out in serial killer characters; audiences look for tell-tale signs such as a troubled childhood or psychopathy in order to understand what motivates a serial killer to commit their crimes. These signs also reassure us that we don't have the same proneness as a serial killer to commit heinous crimes.

By considering the way media is consumed today, with a focus on the popular consumption method of binge-watching, a connection was made between society's negative hyper-consumption habits and those of a serial killer. These include abandonment of self-control, dismissal of societal expectations, and succumbing to selfish urges. In a radical sense, serial

killers reflect back many of the negative aspects that go along with this society's excessive consumption practices; America has become fascinated with an enemy that emulates its own society. It's important to recognize that the public fixates on a figure that reflects itself, and that this may mean that the interpretation of the serial killer (or possibly an entirely new public enemy) may change with the times.

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Appendix

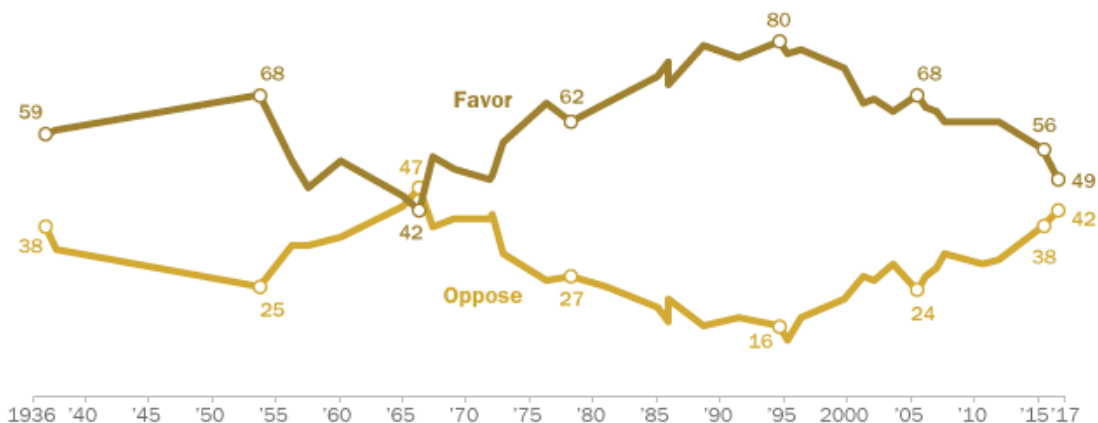
Table 1

Name	Nickname	Sex	Real or Fictional?	Convicted Crimes	Emphasis in Paper
Ed Kemper	Co-Ed Killer	Male	Real	Eight counts of first-degree murder; serving life sentence	The Stereotypical Serial Killer
Ted Bundy	None	Male	Real	Kidnap, assault, three counts of first-degree murder, three counts of attempted murder; executed in 1989	The Seemingly-Normal Serial Killer
Dexter Morgan	None	Male	Fictional	None	Troubled Childhood
Aileen Wuornos	First Female Serial Killer	Female	Real	Six counts of first-degree murder; executed in 2002	Troubled Childhood
Hannibal Lecter	Hannibal the Cannibal	Male	Fictional	Nine counts of first-degree murder and cannibalism; pled insanity	Psychopathy
Dennis Rader	BTK (Bind, Torture, Kill)	Male	Real	Ten counts of first-degree murder; serving life sentence	Psychopathy

Table 2

Support for death penalty continues to fall

% who ___ the death penalty for persons convicted of murder



Notes: Don't know responses not shown. 1935-1995 data from Gallup.

Source: Survey conducted Aug. 23-Sept. 2, 2016.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Taken from Death Penalty Information Center, "PEW POLL: Public Support for the Death Penalty Drops Below 50% for First Time in 45 Years" <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/images/Pew2016.png>