LINGUISTIC ALCHEMY AND CRIME NARRATIVES: DECONSTRUCTING ROMANTICIZATION IN SERIAL KILLERS' DOCUMENTARIES

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Candidate of **Master of Philosophy** at the National University of Modern Languages do hereby declare that the thesis **Linguistic Alchemy and Crime Narrative: Deconstructing Romanticization in Serial Killers' Documentaries** submitted by me in partial fulfilment of MPhil degree, is my original work, and has not been submitted or published earlier. I also solemnly declare that it shall not, in future, be submitted by me for obtaining any other degree from this or any other university or institution.

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ABSTRACT

Title: Linguistic Alchemy and Crime Narrative: Deconstructing Romanticisation in Serial Killers' Documentaries

True crime documentaries have become increasingly popular, but they have also been criticized for their potential to glorify and romanticize the lives and crimes of serial killers. This study attempts to deconstruct the potentially romanticized portrayals of serial killers in true crime documentaries. The literature review examines the evolution of the crime genre, its impact on viewers' perceptions, and prior research on the romanticization and glorification of serial killers, concluding with a theoretical discussion. Fillmore's (1982) theory of semantic Frames is adopted as a theoretical framework for the present study. The data sample includes subtitles of 5 Netflix serial killer documentaries within a time frame of 2019-2022. Coding categories were developed to easily manage a huge amount of data. An approach to semantic frame analysis is used to analyze the linguistic units which evoke semantic frames. The broader communication frames are then discussed to explore romanticized and glorified depictions intended for the viewers. A comparative narrative analysis is also performed to identify the recurring themes and narrative patterns which produce romanticized and glorified constructions of serial killers across these documentaries. The qualitative data analysis showed that almost all the serial killers were portrayed as media celebrities by highlighting their cultural appeal, attributing physical and personality-based charms, adding to their allure. Inclusion of backstories emphasized their internal struggles and issues, thus inviting sympathy and identification with these criminals. Lastly, the minimum and marginalized representation of victims further casts the killers in a better light. This imbalance shifts the attention and sets the stage for potential romanticization, which calls for balanced storytelling along with proper ethical framing. Future narratives should be victim-centered and serve some educational purpose rather than being solely entertainment-oriented.

Key Words: Crime Narratives, Serial Killer Documentaries, Romanticization, Semantic Frame Analysis, Coding categories, celebrity status, Identification and Sympathy, Charm and Appeal, Victim Marginalization, Ethical Considerations.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my beloved nephew, **Muhammad Tahir** who is the sole reason my sanity is still intact, and who showed me that true love has no bounds. This thesis is also dedicated to my **Abu Jan**, who puts up with all my whims and who is The most supportive and loving father of the world. This work is also dedicated to my **Ami Jan** who has always protected me from all odds and who always puts her children first before anything else, even herself. And lastly this work is dedicated to **Ammara Naseem**, who despite all of her shortcomings and insecurities, kept going and brought this work to its destined end.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

The term 'true crime' has been used for generations to sell magazines and voyeuristic 'pulp' paperbacks, with its intentions to both frighten and entertain the readers. True crime narratives did not become a source of widespread fascination or obsession until the twentieth century. This popularity sustained and heightened itself over the first two decades of the 21st century. True crime narratives can sometimes be accounts of attempts to track a murderer/killer. Such discourse of evil is often adopted to explain deviant acts that society finds unable to account for, or even understand or comprehend. On the other hand, the figure or individual who is deviant, for instance, Bundy, is also the center of social attention and stimulates a mixture of fascination and fear and in some cases, even attains celebrity status. This in itself has given way to a large body of literature dedicated to 'real crimes' and the serial killers, but very little of this material is of a serious academic nature. In the contemporary world, true crime is still the biggest area of growth under the umbrella of crime fiction genre. However, the text is always discourse, and never a way to reveal some eternal and unchanging truth (Peters, 2020). And that is what compelled the author to untangle the linguistic intricacies found in the serial killer documentaries.

True crime has indeed grown into a compelling genre which captivates audiences and offers a window to the darker realms of human behaviour. In this genre, there are narratives surrounding serial killers; the individuals whose heinous acts have been immortalized in both factual and fictional stories. As society's fascinationwith true crime narratives has increased, there is an observable shift in the portrayal of serial killers in the media. A serial killer is someone who has killed three or more people, almost all of whom are usually strangers, over a period of time, and usually with some sort of cooling-off period between killings (Philbin and Philbin, 2009). The term 'serial' began to be used in the early 1980s for people who repeat a particular crime. Serial killer narratives have undergone a transformation from

straightforward accounts of criminality to complex, and often very sensational portrayals which invoke notions of heroism, mystery, and allure.

This is also one of the main reasons for conducting this research to uncover the problematic romanticized portrayals, that are violating ethical codes and standards. Romanticization, in this context is a phenomenon wherein the sinister becomes seductive. It has occupied a place in the media's depiction of serial killers. Romanticization is one of the very trending directions to which true crime cinema is leaning towards. It is a fairly broad term which means, to talk about something in a way that makes it sound better than it is, or to believe that something is better than it is. This romanticization can be seen in the way certain aspects of serial killers' personalities, motives, and crimes are portrayed, which blur the line between horror and fascination. And how they are portrayed as being better than they actually are.

Serial killer narratives have proved over the past five years that it can be set as a goal for the biggest streamers in the game. But with that increased attention comes increased scrutiny. Perhaps the fact, which is most worrying, is that true crime narratives, built around serial killers, often exploit or diminish victims, survivors, and their family members, the people most affected by these horrible events, while directly or indirectly lionizing the criminals. (Sayles, 2021) Alchemy, in the Cambridge dictionary, is defined as

"A type of chemistry, especially in the Middle Ages, that dealt with trying to find a way to change ordinary metals into gold and with trying to find a medicine that would cure any disease"

Per this research topic, linguistic alchemy means how language shapes reality and influences public perceptions. In this context, it specifically means an exploration into the process of language used in true crime documentaries and how it helps to carry the serial killer narrative in biased directions. which in this case is unnecessary romanticization and humanization.

Within the expansive world of true crime media, documentaries hold a very distinguished position, often presenting themselves as factual narratives while delicately blurring the fine line between objective reporting and sensationalism.

Documentaries are actively being produced in a variety of styles. Their focus is on truthful events and real persons, and they make their audience see those people and events in a different light than before. Many documentaries often deal with controversial topics (Jenkins, 2021). The huge influx of true crime documentaries on infamous serial killers also sits under the controversial type of topics, hence the need for this study.

Documentaries, referred to as 'films of presumptive assertion', inherently make presumptions about the events they claim to portray and declare a specific viewpoint on the subject matter being addressed. This term actually presents the idea that documentaries not only report the facts but also make indirect and hidden claims about the meaning and significance, and importance of those facts. This inherent bias is often influenced by the filmmaker's perspective or the desired impact on the audience, and it molds the narrative being presented to the viewers (Carroll, 1988). By making assumptions or assertions about the motives, emotions, and consequences surrounding the events, documentaries actively construct a particular interpretation of the true crime story. So a proper understanding of the link between these presumptions and the narrative structure of these documentaries is very important for a detailed analysis of how these portrayals are contributing to the potentially romanticized and favorable viewpoint about such criminals.

The idea of true-crime documentaries as serious art had existed for decades: Berlinger and Sinofsky's 90s work, along with Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line* in 1988, Andrew Jarecki's *Capturing the Friedmans* in 2003, and Jean-Xavier de Lestrade's *The Staircase* in 2004, had gathered cult followings and challenged the way people think about criminal justice. According to an analysis by an independent research company at the time, more than 19 million people watched *Making a Murderer* in the first 35 days after its debut in December 2015. The market exploded in the few years after that. Netflix proved *Making a Murderer* was no fluke by producing a seemingly endless string of widely praised series, from *The Keepers* to *The Ted Bundy Tapes*. True crime has proven over the past five years that it can be a tent-pole for the biggest streamers in the game (Sayles, 2021).

Whilst each of these aforementioned programs becomes a viral sensation upon its release, one has to question their existence at all, presenting multiple issues with the consumption of media in modern society. Behind every sinister murder, horrific sexual assault or any other disturbing crime, there is a victim. That person is either tragically deceased or still living with the indescribable trauma of their past. Though when such victims are paraded in true crime documentaries, with their murders broken down detail-by-detail, the human behind the figure is lost, and the only memorable name behind the killing is the murderer themselves.

More recently, a cousin of one of Jeffrey Dahmer's victims came out against the Netflix series, Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story, for re-traumatizing him and his family. By dehumanizing the victim, we glorify the killers and mass murderers whose gory dealings sell the show with gruesome acts and staggering body counts. Forensic psychiatrist Dr. Park Dietz, while speaking to BBC News, stated that society has witnessed decades of mass murders and emphasized that media coverage plays a crucial role in preventing further violence. He explained that he has repeatedly advised major news outlets not to sensationalize such crimes by opening stories with dramatic sirens, repeatedly showing images of the perpetrator, or providing nonstop coverage. According to him, media narratives should avoid turning killers into antiheroes or focusing on body counts, and instead should center the story on the affected community while presenting the events in a restrained and non-sensational manner. (Russell, 2022)

According to reports, Netflix paid millions to acquire the US rights to a brand-new film featuring heartthrob actor Zac Efron as Bundy. The teaser sparked online outrage over accusations that it sexualized the murderer. (Cooper, 2019)

Monster has become one of the streamer's most-watched series since debuting on Sept. 23, and criticism over the show has grown as quickly as its popularity. Critics have questioned the need to revisit the story of a serial killer who targeted young men who were primarily Black and brown. Much of the discussion has focused on the way in which systemic racism allowed Dahmer to continue killing men. Some family members of the victims of Dahmer have also spoken out against the series, saying it has re-traumatized them. (Mendez II, 2022)

The recent explosive interest and the popularity of the true crime genre is extremely alarming because what we are looking at here are not some celebrities but monsters who killed without any remorse or guilt. This, in turn, puts a great demand for a detailed exploration of these true crime documentaries and their role in the potential romanticization of serial killers. Previous studies have analyzed the portrayal of murderers or criminals in films, but these studies lacked a sufficiently detailed analysis. They were mostly focused either on the generalized portrayals in a large no of data or detailed exploration into a limited and small data sample. None of these studies went into great detail to explore how serial killers are being portrayed and how this portrayal is adding to their romanticization. This study aimed to explore this role by analyzing in detail how these documentaries portray serial killers and in what way these portrayals glorify/romanticize serial killers. Textual and narrative techniques are of significant influence in this process, as documentaries involve a variety of strategies to convey the information and to shape the audience's perception of serial killers. The methodology employed in this research is rooted in semantic frame analysis, a theoretical framework deeply entrenched in Fillmore's (1982) frame semantics. Semantic frame analysis enables the systematic exploration of the cognitive structures that underpin language and meaning. In the context of this study, the analysis focused on identifying and dissecting the semantic frames activated in the serial killer documentaries. Grounded in frame theory, this approach provides a comprehensive lens through which to untie the complexities of how language and narrative elements individually and collectively contribute to the construction of romanticized portrayals of serial killers in Netflix documentaries.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

True crime documentaries have become increasingly popular, but they have also been criticized for their potential to glorify and romanticize the lives and crimes of serial killers. This has led to concerns that these documentaries may perpetuate harmful myths and stereotypes about serial killers, and contribute to their romanticization and glorification. This study aims to investigate the role of true crime documentaries in the romanticization of serial killers by conducting semantic frame analysis of their portrayals. By thoroughly looking into the semantic frames, alongside the narrative techniques employed, this research seeks to investigate the

nuanced ways in which these documentaries are constructing the identities of serial killers and contributing to their romanticization.

1.3 Research Objectives

1. To analyze the interactions of linguistic frames and narrative techniques in shaping the overall representation of serial killers

2. To examine the contribution of these portrayals to the potential romanticization of these criminals in the selected documentaries

1.4 Research Questions

1. What role does the interactions of linguistic frames and narrative techniques play in shaping the overall representation of serial killers?

2. What contribution does this representation make to the potential romanticization of these criminals?

1.5 Delimitations

The study had been delimited by focusing only on the subtitles of the selected documentaries due to the extensive nature of the data, which included five documentary series, 3 of which had 4 episodes per documentary, while 2 documentaries had 3 episodes per documentary, for a total, 18 episodes. Visual data from these documentaries, such as video footage, images, and reenactments, was also excluded from the data as it would have significantly added to the study's complexity. Also, given the large amount of visual content across multiple episodes, the overarching analysis would have been difficult to manage and interpret effectively. By limiting the analysis to subtitles, the study kept its scope in a manageable range and extracted useful data from the textual content of these documentaries.

1.6 Significance of the Study

In the field of linguistics, this work holds significance for several reasons. Firstly, the study contributed to how language is used to construct narratives about serial killers. Through the identification and analysis of semantic frames, the study

uncovered the intended communicative frames and narrative strategies that are shaping the portrayal of serial killers in media discourse.

Moreover, the study offered useful insights about how filmmakers convey specific messages and evoke emotional responses from audiences. By examining lexical units that evoked cognitive frames, the study also highlighted the conceptual background guiding the communication of each frame and provided a detailed understanding of the cognitive processes involved in media consumption.

Lastly, the study's focus on linguistic elements within true crime documentaries allowed for a detailed examination of how language was used to romanticize and normalize the portrayal of serial killers. Through the analysis of the linguistic choices and narrative techniques, this study will identify different patterns and themes that contribute to the glorification of violence and criminality in popular media.

Overall, this study offered valuable and worthy insights into the linguistic dimensions of media representations of serial killers, by not only providing a deeper understanding of how language is being used to construct narratives, but also to evoke emotions and shape public discourse surrounding crime and criminals.

1.7 Research Methodology

As the popularity of such documentaries has continued to rise, it has thus become essential to understand the variety of ways in which linguistic and narrative elements are collectively contributing to the framing of these individuals. Grounded in Framing Theory, which particularly emphasizes semantic frames, this research aimed to shed light on how these documentaries shape the narrative around serial killers. The study also extended its focus to the investigation of potential romanticization, hence the critical need to perceive the implications of such portrayals on perceptions of society. By utilizing a qualitative research design and conducting semantic frame analysis, this study delved into the selected documentaries, examined the linguistic choices, and narrative structures employed in these documentaries. Through this exploration, one of the study's main aims was to deconstruct romanticization, which was achieved by looking into the construction of

narratives around serial killers. This offered a detailed understanding of the impact of these elements on audience perceptions.

1.8 Operational Definitions

1. Linguistic Alchemy

Linguistic alchemy, in this study, is a term used to refer to the transformation of violent, evil and disturbing realities of serial killers into somewhat appealing or normalized ones. It is operationalized by identifying linguistic units including euphemisms, metaphors and emotionally charged language, which helps create that desired outcome.

2. Romanticization

Romanticization here refers to presenting serial killers in a better light and attempting to portray them as normal human beings. This is operationalized by looking for instances where language is used to emphasize or highlight their good looks, eminent personality traits or by evoking sympathetic feelings for them. It is also looked for in the victims' representation as well.

3. Semantic Frames

Semantic Frames are those underlying structures of meaning that are activated by specific word or narrative choices and shape how things are perceived. These are operationalized in this research by examining repetitive patterns, lexical choices and how these construct the portrayals in a romanticized way.

1.9 Organization of the Study

This study includes five chapters. Each one, with its own set of details is discussed one by one in brief detail.

Introduction

This chapter explains the title, what the study is about, why the need to do this research. Then it presents statement of the problem, research questions and objectives. It also discusses the significance of study, the necessary delimitations of the study and a brief overview of the research methodology.

Literature Review

In this section, a niche around the title of the study is created, from the history and evolution of true crime narratives to the arrival of serial killers' narratives. The fascination around these narratives is also discussed along with their influences and implications. Previous studies are also reviewed to identify the research gap for the present study.

Research Methodology

In this chapter, the research design is presented with the detailed exploration of theoretical framework and analytical frameworks which act as the guide map for conducting the data analysis. Data selection, data sample and the process of data analysis is also discussed.

Data Analysis

This chapter delves deeply into all the documentaries and analyzes the linguistic frames in detail. For each documentary, first the individual narrative framing is discussed and then at the end a comparative narrative analysis is constructed.

Findings and Conclusion

The final chapter of the study accumulates all the findings and includes a brief discussion over it. The potential romanticization across the portrayals is also discussed upon and then the final reflections and further suggestions for the future narratives are given.

1.10 Summary

The heightened popularity of crime narratives and their increased production has raised concerns over the way these criminals, especially serial killers, are being portrayed by filmmakers. A detailed exploration is thus necessary to investigate how these violent and disturbing serial killers are being presented before the audience. This is to check if they are being romanticized by highlighting their positive attitudes and traits, whether their media appeal is being emphasized to assert their fame long after they are gone, or they are being sympathized through making their life stories

relatable for the general audience while diminishing their victims' faces and stories. All of these themes and patterns were explored through the identification and analysis of semantic frames found in the selected excerpts. This investigation paves way for filmmakers to take precautionary measures in creating such stories and for general public to consume these narratives from an objective point of view. This study also holds significance for policy makers to censor any narrative that presents and portrays violent criminals in romanticized way.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The literature review begins by tracing the history and evolution of the crime genre, providing insights into its development over time and its significance within popular culture. This chapter also discusses in detail the theoretical framework and theoretical assumptions about romanticization which will in combination be used to analyze and explore the data to reach the objectives of this study. This exploration is a foundation for understanding the broader context in which true crime narratives operate and their role in shaping societal perceptions of crime and criminals. Subsequently, the review delves into the methods, patterns, and techniques employed in true crime narratives to portray serial killers and their crimes. In addition, previous works will also be examined as to how serial killer narratives have been analyzed, focusing on the theoretical frameworks and analytical methods employed in these studies. Moreover, the literature review examines the implications of these portrayals on public perceptions and attitudes toward serial killers. It investigates how the media depiction of serial killers can influence societal understanding of criminal behavior, victimization, and justice. Additionally, the review explores the phenomenon of fascination with serial killers and murderers, analyzing the psychological, sociological, and cultural factors that contribute to their glorification in popular culture. This includes an examination of true crime narratives contribute to the glorification and humanization of serial killers and the romanticization of their crimes. The literature review also identifies gaps in existing research, highlighting areas where further investigation is warranted.

2.2 True Crime Narratives: History and Evolution

Punnett (2018) defines true crime as a storytelling genre, sometimes considered controversial, that spans multiple platforms and is often centered on murder narratives, sharing some heritage with journalism but driven by different impulses (Gemzøe, 2021). While journalism primarily aims to inform the public, true crime has additional motivations. Punnett identifies eight key components that

classify a narrative as true crime if most are present (Boling, 2019): Truth-based, Subversive, Crusader. Geographic, Forensic, Vocative and Folkloric.

True crime's origins and its associated criticism can be traced back to at least the 16th century (Burger, 2016). During this period, hundreds of crime pamphlets circulated, typically focusing on horrific murders and concluding with a Christian moral (Burger, 2016; Antoniak, 2021). These pamphlets aimed to promote punitive actions, spread religious agendas, and reinforce social order. However, with the Enlightenment, the genre faced backlash for its insensitivity, exploitative nature, and overly emotional style, leading to its decline (Antoniak, 2021)

The rise of newspapers revitalized true crime, revealing diverse storytelling styles. For instance, the 1892 case of Lizzie Borden was reported differently across newspapers; The New York Times offered factual accounts, while the Boston Globe sensationalized the story (Burger, 2016). Critics of true crime initially focused on its potential exploitation, but new ethical issues emerged as the genre's popularity grew. Publisher Randolph Hearst's *Murder Squad* is an early example of true crime interfering with criminal investigations, as they often disrupted crime scenes and produced dubious evidence to fit their narratives (Bolin, 2018).

The next significant milestone in true crime entertainment was Truman Capote's 1966 book, *In Cold Blood*, which made it socially acceptable to engage with narratives about gruesome crimes (Punnett, 2018, as cited in Gemzøe, 2021). This non- fiction novel detailed the murders of the Clutter family in Kansas and employed narrative techniques typical of fiction to depict true events, allowing for a blurring of reality and entertainment (Antoniak, 2021).

The 1988 documentary *The Thin Blue Line* by Errol Morris is another pivotal work, notable for its direct impact on a legal case. Investigating the 1976 murder of police officer Robert Wood, Morris's film led to the acquittal of Randall Adams after a taped confession from another interviewee, David Harris (Bruzzi, 2016). Morris exemplified the Justice aspect of true crime, focusing on using the film to achieve legal outcomes (Butler, 2016, as cited in Stoneman & Packer). Despite some criticisms of its stylistic choices and reenactments, the documentary marked a trend of true crime media aiming for real-world justice.

Justice in true crime can also be achieved through instilling new ideas and reflections or distributing punishment via media, as seen in the 2012 documentary *The Act of Killing*. Directed by Joshua Oppenheimer and Christine Cynn, this film explored the Indonesian mass killings of 1965-1966, focusing on gangster Anwar Congo. Though legal action was not possible, the film delivered justice by exposing Congo's lack of moral awareness and cultural justification for his crimes (Stoneman & Packer, 2020).

By presenting the project as an opportunity for Congo to increase his notoriety, the directors used folkloric and subversive elements to reveal his self-deception. As the film progressed, Congo's initial enthusiasm turned to discomfort, culminating in his realization of the severity of his actions when he reenacted them from a victim's perspective. This climax, where Congo experiences terror and regret, provides a sense of justice through public vilification and punishment (Stoneman & Packer, 2020).

2.3 Serial Killer Narratives

In 2006, the FBI's Behavioral Science Unit hosted experts in various fields at a symposium in San Antonio, Texas, to create a standard definition of serial murder for investigators and researchers. The agreed-upon definition of serial murder from the symposium was unlawful killing of two or more victims by the same offenders in separate events. (Morton & Hilts, 2008).

The term 'serial murderer' first appeared in the mid-1960s, but it did not become widely used until the 1980s; nonetheless, the concept dates back to 1888, when Jack the Ripper murdered five prostitutes in London's Whitechapel neighborhood. Until the 1920s, when Edmund Pearson wrote a string of lucrative true crime books and essays in prestigious publications like Vanity Fair and The New Yorker. A more sophisticated and respectable audience was introduced to true crime through Pearson's stringent selection standards, aestheticism, and controlled poetics; conservative politics and a moralizing tone were also incorporated. But as the popularity of true crime stories increased, the stories' superficial respectability began to crumble, and graphic, sensationalistic content once again became the standard. As the twentieth century proceeded, images of crime and criminality extended beyond

cultural boundaries and became increasingly vital to the common imagination. Serial killers and psychopaths were frequently depicted in fiction and movies, especially after the development of the paperback format. Jim Thompson, perhaps the most well-known of the pulp writers, has made a significant investment in serial killer depictions. His 1952 masterpiece, The Killer Inside Me, which Mark Seltzer describes as a 'remarkable prototype novel of compulsive killing', introduces one of popular culture's most persistent - and intriguing - fictional serial killers. The work is narrated by Ford himself, a narrative method that provides the reader with unprecedented access to the killer's mind and inspires empathy for Thompson's protagonist. Due to their fictional status, audience acceptance of such characters was generally unaffected; but, Truman Capote's sympathetic portrayal of murders Perry Smith and Dick Hickock in his 1965 'non-fiction novel' In Cold Blood was received with a slew of criticism. The perpetrators' savagery is examined in depth, but so is their humanity, a startling narrative twist that challenges the reader to confront his or her own moral equivalence. Indeed, first-person empathic representations of serial killers became a characteristic of the twentieth century, contributing significantly to the figure's valorization and eventual celebration.

In an article by Vishnevetsky (2017) for AV Club, it is stated that The Crimes of Diogo Alves, a Portuguese film from 1909, is the earliest documented portrayal of a serial killer in cinema (Vishnevetsky, 2017). Since then, a multitude of serial killer films has inundated the market. From Alfred Hitchcock's 1960 picture Psycho to Jonathan Demme's 1991 film *The Silence of the Lambs*, the film industry is abundant with movies that draw inspiration from these infamous real-life criminals. Thomas Harris, an American author and screenwriter, solidified the link between serial killings, law enforcement, and popular culture. Harris, characterized by Leonard Cassuto as probably the most influential American crime writer since Dashiell Hammett, set the blueprint for serial killer literature and pushed serial killers and the profilers who pursued them into the mainstream. His character 'Hannibal Lecter' occupied a unique place in the country's history, and Harris became indirectly responsible for an explosive interest in serial killers in the late twentieth century.

Ellis (1991), in his book *American Psycho,* marks a turning point in the way that serial killers are portrayed in American popular culture, and Mary Harron's 2000 film of the same name only served to amplify its impact. American Psycho is arguably the primary work that contributed to the normalization of serial killing in the late 20th century because of its amiable antagonist and lax attitude towards depictions of extreme violence. Characters like Jeff Lindsay's Dexter were made conceivable by Bateman, who also brought attention to the aestheticization of violence in modern culture.

Serial killers' portrayals have softened from deformed monsters who targeted their victims randomly to people who were seemingly normal and had a humanistic side to their characters (Cetl, 2003). During 1980s, slashers movies became popular in which serial killers usually experienced a traumatic incident in their formative years that triggered a psychological transformation into a killer (Jenkins, 1994). In the years since, movies about serial murder continued to grow in popularity and also achieved significant critical success. The film *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) earned five Academy Awards, including Best Picture and Best Supporting Actor for Anthony Hopkins' portrayal of fictional serial killer Hannibal Lecter (Grimes, 1992). A little over a decade later, Charlize Theron also won an Academy Award for her portrayal of actual serial killer, Aileen Wournos, in the film *Monster* 2003 (Schmid, 2005).

True crime documentaries are becoming more popular on television, the web, podcasts, and film. The genre presents important questions regarding law representation in the digital age, justice, narrative, evidence, audience 'justification', and truth instability. Are we at risk of blurring documentary and legal distinctions? Evidence or filmmaking? Although Serial was likely the main reason the Syed's case was reopened, Sarah Koenig wants to remind listeners that she is not a lawyer or crime reporter. The documentary may serve justice, and the law can be captivating entertainment; it's crucial not to blend the two. (Bruzzi, 2016)

While true crime may fall under the category of documentary, it represents a dystopian variant. Traditional documentaries are typically intended to raise awareness about dire conditions to inspire change, whereas true crime depicts issues

that seem insoluble, as they are rooted within the individual psyche rather than social conditions. This genre often explores the realm of psychopaths or, more commonly, sociopaths, whose malevolence lacks an apparent cause. As such, no legislation can address the root of the problem. (Browder, 2010)

Fuhs (2018) observes that non-fiction films are often regarded as having a privileged relationship to the truth due to their claims of authenticity and presumed indexical relationship. However, many documentary filmmakers recognize that truth is not always paramount. Instead, they often prioritize entertainment value and the need to convey either their own argument or that of their subject. (Austin, 2006)

2.4 True Crime Media and Its Influence and Implications

Entertainment media is persuasive in nature and its role in shaping perceptions of the general public is more than news media, due to the greater consumption percentage of the entertainment media (Prior, 2005).

Entertainment media has been shown to influence the perceptions of the general public toward components of the criminal justice system. For example, Donovan and Klahm (2015) found that viewers of crime dramas are more likely to believe that the police are successful at reducing crime. Similarly, entertainment media has also been found to influence perceptions of criminal justice policies, including an association between crime drama viewing and support for the death penalty.

In the 1970s, Gerbner and colleagues proposed a "cultivation theory" where high levels of exposure to television shapes and distorts the perceptions of the viewer to align with any version of reality, even when it's an incorrect or misleading one (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Films also act as an important source of crime related information for public (Rafter, 2006). The increasing number of serial murder films is a proof of that.

The prevalence of true crime media has significantly increased in recent years, saturating various platforms and constantly exposing audiences to real-life horror stories through news outlets and virtual mediums. Top-streaming podcasts such as *Crime Junkie*, *Morbid*, and *My Favorite Murder*, alongside more than 35

Netflix original series and films on true crime, reflect the public's evident interest in these narratives. This genre's appeal, however, involves a complex dynamic. As consumers, listeners, viewers, and audience members, we often overlook that these stories are non- fictional accounts of real people with families, friends, and jobs. The transformation of these life-destroying events into entertainment is disconcerting upon reflection. While some media respectfully acknowledge victims and their families, many others insensitively highlight the perpetrators. *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* exemplifies this trend by focusing on the criminal rather than honoring the victims. (Strutz)

Surette's (2013) study *Cause or Catalyst: The Interaction of Real World and Media Crime Models* explores the relationship between real-world crime models and copycat crime. The study found that 22% of inmates had committed a copycat crime, 20% were violent, and 19% perceived the media as a helpful source of information on how to commit a crime. Media exposure was a predictor of engaging in copycat crime.

In an article for *The Odyssey* titled *We Need to Stop Romanticizing Serial Killers – They're Not Quirky, They're Psychopaths*, Gonzalez (2019) examines the harmful effects of portraying handsome men as serial killers on young girls. Gonzalez, a long-time fan of Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuk's FX series *American Horror Story*, discusses how the pilot season features Evan Peters as Tate Langdon, a good-looking high-schooler who is also a psychopath and mass murderer. She reflects on how she found this depiction attractive, illustrating the problematic nature of romanticizing such characters. Gonzalez argues that the current abundance of serial killer movies and our media consumption (amplified by platforms like Twitter and Instagram) contribute to the fetishization of these criminals (Gonzalez, 2019).

Ramsland (2019) examines why young girls idolize Ted Bundy, influenced by his portrayal as a charismatic and handsome figure. She notes that media depictions make some young girls believe they could have fixed Bundy. Platforms like Tumblr, Twitter, and TikTok are filled with Bundy admirers who see him as a handsome, articulate young man who could sometimes be gentle and caring. This hyper-fixation arises from his media portrayal, which often emphasizes his charm

over his brutality. She also highlights the harmful effects of these portrayals, as they can lead young people to romanticize violence and abuse, seeing it as part of love. This perspective disrespects Bundy's victims and their families and teaches a dangerous lesson that love can involve brutality and abuse.

In an article for the Sonoma State Star, Bounsall (2021) critiques the Netflix docu-series *The Nightstalker* about Richard Ramirez. She references *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* and notes that casting Zac Efron as Ted Bundy was distasteful due to his positive reputation and status as a millennial sex symbol. An interviewee stated that Efron's portrayal made it hard to take Bundy seriously as a serial killer, as it sexualized him and created a fandom around him. Bounsall (2021) argues that viewers will always see Efron as the High School Musical heartthrob, which hinders the portrayal of Bundy as a bloodthirsty killer. The film's lack of graphic scenes showing Bundy's crimes allows for speculations of innocence, making it difficult to view him in the negative light he deserves. He concludes that sexual and domestic violence should never be romanticized, warning that desensitizing brutality through publicity can normalize it in private life.

In his article for CNN Entertainment, Lowry (2019) discusses *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile*, noting that while Efron resembles Bundy, his portrayal adds to the discomfort of watching the film. Despite the narrative split between Bundy's perspective and Liz Kendall's, the film remains unsettling, especially with Efron playing Bundy, who is seen as 'dreamy' by a courtroom onlooker. Moore (2022), a critic for *Screen Zealots*, remarked that showing a "gentler" side of a violent, deranged serial killer is unnecessary. Likewise, Leishman (2019), Assistant Editor at *The Mary Sue*, noted on *Rotten Tomatoes* that the film glamorizes Ted Bundy and pays little attention to honoring his victims. Lucas (2019), a film critic for *In Review Online*, commented on Rotten Tomatoes that the director, Berlinger, spends two hours letting Bundy manipulate from beyond the grave instead of unpacking his manipulative nature.

In an article for *The Washington Post* titled *Does Netflix have a killer problem?* Zeitchik (2019) explores the media's responsibility in portraying true crime and reenactments. He observes that Netflix, more than other entertainment

platforms, frequently highlights gruesome violence, often directed against women, and occupies the screens of over 60 million viewers in the United States alone. He references Glenn Sparks, a Purdue University professor specializing in the effects of media violence, who suggests that while Netflix might justify their content by claiming it aligns with viewer demands, research indicates that increasing on-screen violence can lead to greater real-life tolerance of such behavior.

De Beer in her thesis *Facing the Gaze: The Cinematic Romanticisation of the Serial Killer* in *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile"* highlights the problematic nature of romanticizing serial killers in cinema, with a specific focus on how *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* portrays Ted Bundy. By examining the dynamics of the gaze and the face, the research underscores how these cinematic techniques foster identification and empathy towards serial killers, transforming them into 'celebrity monsters.' This romanticization and normalization of serial killers can desensitize audiences to violence and brutality, as cinema's affective power extends beyond the screen, influencing societal perceptions and emotions. The thesis calls for a critical re-evaluation of how serial killers are depicted in media, emphasizing the need to balance engaging storytelling with ethical responsibility.

Perchtold-Stefan et.al. (2025) in the article *Out of Dark: New Psychological Perspectives on People Fascination with Serial Killers*, a large-scale empirical study, examined the psychological and demographic factors associated with true crime media consumption, emphasizing potential negative impacts. The findings suggest that women, who consume more true crime content, often do so driven by fears of victimization and a desire for defensive vigilance, which may reinforce existing anxieties and perceptions of fear related to safety. This heightened consumption, especially among women, could contribute to increased overestimations of victimization risks and a sustained sense of insecurity over time. For men, traits like antagonism, Machiavellianism, and other dark personality features are linked to true crime interest, which may reflect or reinforce tendencies toward hostility, manipulation, and desensitization to violence, potentially fostering antisocial attitudes or attitudes that normalize violence.

While formats like podcasts can offer coping benefits, the overall pattern raises concerns that extensive engagement with true crime particularly when driven by fear or sensationalism may perpetuate negative stereotypes about danger and victimization, increase anxiety, and contribute to a distorted perception of societal safety. The study suggests that these consumption motives and personality factors could have maladaptive effects, potentially fostering a more fearful, distrustful outlook and desensitization toward violence, with implications for social attitudes and individual well-being.

2.5 Fascination with Serial Killer Narratives

Schmid (2005), in his book *Natural Born Celebrities*, argues that "the convergence of violence and stardom is a hallmark of American modernity, with serial killers epitomizing this blend" (p. 105). Despite the rarity of serial murders today, serial killers are omnipresent in contemporary popular culture, featured in films, television, true crime, music, podcasts, and more. This widespread presence reflects a significant public fascination with individuals capable of committing extreme acts of violence. He also notes the historical subculture of collecting serial killer- related artifacts, though platforms like eBay banned the sale of such murderabilia in 2001 to prevent mainstream adoration of these criminals (Bond, 2016). He also highlights that "serial killers have transcended their roles as real-life criminals to become mythical figures in popular culture, evident in their representation on merchandise like t-shirts and coffee mugs. Film, particularly Hollywood productions, has played a crucial role in this transformation, facilitating the stardom of serial killers through its significant reach and profitability". (p. 107).

Bonn (2014), in his book *Why We Love Serial Killers*, explores the public's fascination with serial killers and the media's role in their celebrity status. Bonn argues that there is a deep-seated curiosity to understand the minds and motives of those who commit incomprehensible violent crimes. He asserts that news and entertainment media cater to this morbid fascination, often sensationalizing and stylizing the reality of serial murders to attract audiences. This tendency to present serial killers as evil, almost supernatural beings, obscures their human qualities and contributes to their transformation into celebrity monsters (Bonn, 2014).

Seltzer (1998) argues that serial killers exist within a "public culture" where addictive violence is not just a spectacle but a site where private desires intersect in public spaces. He calls this phenomenon "wound culture," characterized by a deep intrigue with torn and broken bodies (p 1-2). Society's fascination extends beyond the killers themselves to the aftermath of their violence. Bonn (2014) supports this, noting that serial killers provide an outlet for society to explore the darker aspects of human nature, which fuels their morbid fascination. The violent nature of these figures and the cathartic power of violence are evident, with screen depictions offering spectators an outlet for their emotions and fears. Schmid (2005) contends that violence, especially when portrayed by well-known stars, can have a cathartic effect and help resolve anxieties. However, there is a danger in portrayals that disconnect the serial killer from violence, as these nonviolent depictions risk normalizing the killers and their actions.

The concept of celebrification, as defined by Driesness (2012) and Jerslev (2014), involves transforming ordinary people or public figures into celebrities through media exposure. Schmid (2005) locates the origins of serial killer celebrification in the serial killer panic of the 1980s, when news media and law enforcement highlighted a new category of threatening criminals, sensationalizing their stories to attract audiences. This era marked a shift where visibility and media attention became sufficient for achieving celebrity status, blurring the lines between fame and notoriety.

In an article for Psychology Today, Bonn (2017) outlines five reasons for our captivation with serial killers: their rarity, their indiscriminate nature, their often extended timelines, the revelation of their subconscious and intrusive thoughts, and the adrenaline rush they provide, akin to a nonfiction horror story for adults. He emphasizes that we tend to humanize serial killers, offering an outlet for our own hidden, dark urges. According to Freud's concept of the id, our fascination with serial killers allows us to explore these buried compulsions safely.

Thomas De Quincey, an English essayist and literary critic, introduced the concept of murder as an art form. De Quincey's three essays on murder, ranging from satirical high jinks to cultural criticism, had a significant influence on crime,

terror, and detective fiction, as well as the rise of nineteenth-century decadence. De Quincey's first essay, "On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts," discusses two different approaches to murder: morally and aesthetically. He distinguishes two stages of murder: morally treating a murder that has not been committed or is not being committed, and appreciating it from an aesthetic perspective when it has already been committed. He believes that a tragedy of murder, viewed from a moral standpoint, can be a meritorious performance when approached from an aesthetic perspective. (Morrison, 2009)

Black (1991) also analyzes the concept of murder via an aesthetic lens, raising the question of whether a killer may be seen as an artist. He contends that murder can be beautifully perceived, transforming the murderer into an artist who specializes in destruction rather than creation. The observer assumes the role of an artist in this aspect. Irrespective of whether murder is regarded as an artifact, the individual who commits the act must be regarded as an artist if their actions elicit an aesthetic reaction in the observer. The portrayal of violence, especially murder, in crime fiction and films is often depicted in an aesthetically pleasing manner. Powerful portrayals of violence enhance the shocking nature of murder and motivate readers/spectators to seek out their own repressed, instinctual curiosity regarding mortality, given the prevailing perception of 'art' in our society.

According to Schneider (2001), even a horrifying murder is often depicted as an artistic creation or a kind of artistic expression. The portrayal of violence as an art form mostly stems from the intention to humanize the killer and force viewers to confront their inclination toward enjoying the intricate act of taking a life.

The process of aestheticizing violence in films mostly revolves around enhancing its allure and desirability, to incite spectators to support the perpetrator rather than sympathize with the victim. Certain observers may yield to the allure of a murderer's captivating or even alluring persona during a performance, and, captivated by the killer, do not find violent scenes repugnant. Conversely, due to how a film is filmed and the techniques employed to make the violence visually appealing, the intense scenes are made more beautiful (Gronstad, 2008). In the Hannibal Lecter series by Thomas Harris, the killer is often presented as a

sophisticated aesthetician who eats the rude (Allue, 2002). Sarah L. Knox (1998) asserts that sometimes the reader even identifies with the figure of the murderer, maintaining an ethical position on the crime while aesthetically appreciating it.

The public interest in murder fiction can be traced back to the beginnings of nineteenth-century humanitarianism. Murder literature offered readers a new kind of excitement and pleasure in voyeuristic entertainment. It described violent assaults in detail and encouraged readers to engage in imaginative play with illicit desires. This trend became more popular as forbidden fruit tastes the sweetest. Murder literature employed new techniques to evoke readers' repugnance and fascination, including detailed descriptions of murder weapons and victims' injuries.

Developments in forensic science made the depictions even more meticulous (Halttunen, 2001). People's interest in violence created a wound culture, where there was a public fascination with torn and open bodies. Thus nineteenth-century murder literature presented murder as a spectacle. (Seltzer, 1998)

Smith (1995) delineates a "structure of sympathy" in his book *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion and the Cinema*, which consists of three levels of engagement: recognition, alignment, and allegiance. The first level, recognition, involves simple identification of the character. the next level which is alignment involves spectators and they start to know and feel the characters. The last level is allegiance when spectators start evaluating the acts and moral values of the characters, which makes it possible to develop sympathy for the characters, which would otherwise be considered undesirable (Rodbjerg, 2015).

Smith (2011) talks about two types of allegiances, partial and perverse. Partial allegiance happens with villians who are presented having humanistic sides, moral codes and values. They are also presented as vulnerable and sensitive, thus creating sympathy.

Society has long used storytelling to deal with monsters, which is the case with the serial killer. Perhaps this is done to understand their behavior or in some strange way to make deviant behavior less terrifying and more digestible. If you can

give a face and identity to the killer and create someone, a spectator can connect with, perhaps the 'monster' loses its power.

A dominant trend in theories on serial killer cinema has been the notion of the serial killer celebrity. However, it may be argued that cinema goes beyond merely creating celebrity killers. Schmid (2005) states that cinema's role in developing the so-called 'modern celebrity system', which has unparalleled influence and profitability, has also created the perfect platform for developing serial killer celebrities. Cinema constructs a larger-than-life monster and, more disturbingly, creates a normalized and romanticized figure with whom the spectator can form an allegiance and empathize.

The concept of romanticizing something refers to the idea that it is spoken or talked about in a manner that is not at all realistic and which makes them seem better than they are. Consequently, the cinematic romanticization of the serial killer refers to the way these killers are represented within cinema as more appealing than they are in reality. Instead of depicting them as brutal murderers, these serial killers are often described and portrayed as mysterious, intelligent, and, in some cases, even charming. By romanticizing these killers, they are painted as being better than they are, and this could even have the effect of normalizing their behavior. It could be argued that romanticizing serial killers is part of contemporary society's way of dealing with them.

By focusing solely on the redeemable qualities of the serial killer or by outweighing any negative attributes they may have, a figure is constructed that the spectator can connect to and sympathize with, and thereby, feelings of guilt are avoided. This results in a romanticized killer who is admired, trusted, or rooted for. Bonn (2014) states that the social construction of celebrity monsters desensitizes the public to the actual horrors endured by the victims of serial killers and their loved ones. The more these figures are painted as charming and revered, the more society becomes comfortable with their existence.

For Schmid (2005), identification in serial killer films also lies with the serial killer and not with the victim, as might be expected. The issue of identification is

central to understanding the complexities involved in the continued romanticization of the serial killer. Put simply, because of this identification, the spectator is drawn into the serial killer's world, and perhaps this is why it might be so easy to ignore their transgressions.

Bonn (2014) makes a key, albeit slightly controversial, argument that serial killers serve a specific function in society, namely that the public can learn something about itself and the dark side of the human condition from serial killers' portrayal on the screen. Additionally, he contends that the socially constructed serial killer identity gives society an outlet to experience the darker side of the human condition that otherwise it cannot or will not consider. Taking Bonn's points into consideration, one might say that the serial killer creates a figure through which the public can live out their dark fantasies by proxy. Such films create a channel through which they can engage with these dark ideas within a controlled space. Bonn (2014) continues this line of thought by stating that the figure of the serial killer and its representation provides an outlet for the public's pent-up anger and frustration as people observe the carnage perpetrated by the serial killer and participate vicariously in his crimes. From this, it is clear that the figure of the serial killer offers somewhat of an escape route for society to indulge its fantasies of violence and terror.

It is these dramatic mechanisms that turn serial killers into sick forms of entertainment where the killer is the star of the show. While the killer may seem like an important character, many people forget about the victims and their role in the crime. Wiest (2021) emphasizes that in U.S. articles, victims are mostly invisible. They are included as numbers in body counts, rarely identified by name, with few details about their lives. Media may categorize these victims as numbers in statistics; however, at the end of the day, these victims were children, parents, friends, partners, teammates, and, most importantly, innocent humans. Whether people agree or disagree with the argument that media and news sites turn crime reports into entertaining anecdotes, all people should at least recognize the adverse effects treating criminals like celebrities has had on victims and their families.

These above mentioned notions of romanticization will be used as a lens to analyze how serial killers are portrayed in a manner that makes them seem more appealing and less horrifying than they genuinely are.

2.6 Representation of Serial Killers in True Crime

The article *Aestheticization of Serial Killers in Contemporary Crime Literature and Film* by Ziomek (2018), published in *New Horizons in English Studies*, explores how contemporary literature and film depict serial killers in an aesthetically appealing manner. By employing various stylistic and narrative techniques, these works present serial killers as seductive and intriguing, leading audiences to sympathize with the villains rather than their victims. This manipulation allows readers and viewers to focus on the aesthetic aspects of murder, disregarding ethical judgments. The paper references Thomas De Quincey's theory that murder can be viewed both morally and aesthetically, arguing that, under the appropriate conditions, murder can evoke an aesthetic response, making the murderer an artist of destruction. Black's work *The Aesthetics of Murder* is used to support this argument, highlighting how violence, particularly murder, is aestheticized in contemporary American culture. Contemporary crime literature and films use sophisticated visual effects, compelling character development, and a focus on the artistic aspects of violence to make it visually appealing and less repulsive. The audience often forms a bond with the murderer rather than the victim, facilitated by presenting the murderer as a complex character with human traits, making them relatable and even sympathetic (Ziomek 2018). The depiction of murder in fiction also serves a cathartic role, allowing the audience to experience and purge destructive impulses in a safe and controlled environment. The fascination with murder fiction can be traced back to the 19th century, where detailed and sensationalistic murder narratives became popular, influenced by the period's humanitarian trends. The aestheticization of serial killers raises questions about the ethical implications of enjoying fictional violence and the role of art in representing morally complex subjects, ultimately providing a comprehensive overview of the arguments and conclusions related to the aestheticization of violence in media (Ziomek, 2018).

Strutz' (2022) thesis, "*Extremely Insensitive, Shockingly Misleading and Dangerous: Exploring the Implications of Romanticizing Serial Killers in Film*," provides a thorough analysis of how serial killers are portrayed in contemporary media, with a particular focus on the film *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil, and Vile*. He argues that casting Zac Efron, a well-known heartthrob, as Ted Bundy contributes significantly to the romanticization of Bundy, blending his horrific actions with Efron's charming persona and potentially misleads viewers into sympathizing with him. The narrative focus on Bundy's personal relationships, particularly through the perspective of his girlfriend Liz Kendall, further complicates this portrayal by humanizing Bundy and downplaying his brutality. Strutz (2022) critiques the media's role in perpetuating harmful narratives that glamorize serial killers, emphasizing that while these films aim to explore psychological complexities, they often end up creating an allure around the killers. This romanticized portrayal can overshadow the real horror of their actions and the suffering of their victims, particularly impacting younger audiences who might develop unhealthy obsessions or distorted perceptions. The thesis also criticizes specific films, noting that the lack of graphic depictions of Bundy's crimes in *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil, and Vile* sanitizes his image, making it difficult for viewers to grasp the severity of his actions. it also highlights the ethical implications of casting attractive actors as serial killers, arguing that this practice skews public perception and detracts from the victims' experiences. The thesis concludes by calling for a more responsible and victim-centered approach in media representations to avoid glorifying perpetrators and to honor the suffering of their victims

Milde's (2021) thesis, "The Changing Portrayals of Serial Killers in Popular Culture: How 'My Friend Dahmer' and 'Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile' Invite Sympathy for Serial Killers," aims to explore how contemporary films depict serial killers in a manner that elicits sympathy from the audience. Milde focuses on the biographical films "*My Friend Dahmer*" (2017) and "*Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil, and Vile*" (2019), which portray Jeffrey Dahmer and Ted Bundy, respectively. These films have been praised for their unique approaches to the serial murder subgenre but also criticized for downplaying the severity of the

crimes committed by the protagonists, encouraging viewers to sympathize with these notorious figures. To achieve her aim, the author employs close textual analysis to examine how the narrative structure and cinematic techniques of these films facilitate a sympathetic attitude towards the serial killer characters. The analysis is framed within the context of cognitive film theory, which focuses on how viewers emotionally engage with film characters. She investigates how the films' narrative structures, character development, and cinematic techniques such as camera work, sound, and lighting contribute to the humanization of Dahmer and Bundy. This approach helps to uncover the methods by which the films encourage audiences to identify with the protagonists, despite their heinous actions.

The thesis further explores the historical context of serial killer portrayals in popular culture, tracing the evolution of the serial killer character from being depicted as purely monstrous to becoming complex, relatable figures. The author discusses the impact of cultural fascination with serial killers and the role of media in shaping public perception. By analyzing these two films, the study aims to highlight a shift in how serial killers are represented in contemporary media and the ethical implications of eliciting sympathy for such characters. This analysis provides insight into the broader cultural phenomenon of serial killer celebrity and the ongoing tension between sensationalism and responsible storytelling in true crime and fiction (Milde 2021).

Snelson's (2021) article "*Guilty Pleasures: New Hollywood Violence and the 1960s True Crime Cycle*" aims to explore the depiction and reception of violence in a specific cycle of late 1960s true crime films. These films, which portray topical mass and serial murders, are analyzed for their ethical and aesthetic approaches within the context of a complex cultural climate transitioning from traditional censorship to more liberal film classifications. This article employs a historical reception studies approach, examining reviews, interviews, and reports from influential American and British critics and trade presses to understand how these films were received and debated. This method challenges dominant understandings of violence and horror in cinema during this period and to highlight how these true crime films, situated between Gothic horror and New Hollywood's violent

revisionism, have been largely neglected in scholarly discourse. The article delves into the critical debates and cultural contexts that shaped the representation of violence in these films, contributing to the broader theoretical and historical study of film and media cycles.

Soulliere's article "*Prime-Time Murder: Presentations of Murder on Popular Television Justice Programs*" aims to analyze the portrayal of murder in three prime-time television justice programs—NYPD Blue, Law and Order, and The Practice—and to compare these depictions to official statistics and established research findings. Through a combination of quantitative and qualitative content analysis of 63 episodes from the 1999/2000 television season, he investigates the accuracy of these portrayals and their potential impact on viewer understanding. The analysis reveals a significant overrepresentation of violent crime, particularly murder, compared to official statistics, which could lead viewers to believe such crimes are more common than they are. While the depiction of relationships, weapon use, and murder locations generally aligns with official data, there is an overemphasis on planned murders, contrasting with the more spontaneous nature of real-life murders. Explanations for murder in these programs are predominantly individualistic, focusing on personal motives like jealousy, anger, or mental illness, and often neglecting sociological factors. The author argues that these portrayals may reinforce false beliefs about the prevalence and nature of violent crime and contribute to an inadequate understanding of broader social and structural causes, highlighting the need for more accurate and comprehensive media representations of crime.

De Beer's (2020) thesis, "Facing the Gaze: The Cinematic Romanticisation of the Serial Killer in Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile," aims to explore the romanticization of serial killers in contemporary cinema, focusing on how films like "Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil, and Vile" portray figures such as Ted Bundy. The author investigates how cinema creates a connection between spectators and characters, leading to troubling empathy toward serial killers. De Beer utilizes frameworks such as the cinematic gaze and the affective power of film to understand this phenomenon. The study examines cinematic techniques like close-ups, framing, and narrative structure, which invite viewers to empathize with the characters on

screen. By analyzing these elements, the author aims to uncover the potential dangers of normalizing and romanticizing violent figures in media, contributing to a broader discussion on the role of cinema in shaping societal perceptions of crime and morality.

Morton's (2021) article "Stylistic Choices in True-Crime Documentaries: The Duty of Responsibility Between Filmmaker and Audience" aims to explore the ethical implications of stylistic choices made by filmmakers in true-crime documentaries and their impact on audiences' perceptions of truth and justice. Morton examines how filmmakers' use of emotion, dialogue, footage, and name titles can either reveal or obscure the subjectivity of their documentaries, influencing viewers' understanding of the criminal justice system. Using a combination of theoretical analysis and case studies of documentaries like *"Making a Murderer," "The Staircase," and "Southwest of Salem,"* The analysis focuses on how these stylistic choices create a perceived authenticity and legitimacy that can manipulate audience perceptions, and stresses the importance of transparency and responsibility in documentary filmmaking to prevent misleading and potentially harmful narratives.

Fludzinsky (2024) in her article, *"Deadly Obsession: Glorified Serial Killers in Modern Media"* attempts to investigate and explore the phenomenon of romanticization in modern TV and film media, particularly docu-dramas. By following a pre- and post-test methodology and showing biographical information about serial killers and clips from docu-series as well, the author has tried to assess their attitudes and any potential shift in viewer perceptions. The two docu-dramas chosen for study had Ted Bundy and Jeffrey Dahmer portrayed in a humanized and romanticized manner. The result showed that after viewing the clips and getting a glimpse of their personal stories, viewer perceptions changed to some extent, with male participants showing more appeal for Dahmer and female participants for Bundy. One reason for this can be the physical charm that Ted Bundy held, which makes him more appealing for women and also his role in the movie presents him somewhat as a loving family-oriented person. While as far as the male appeal for Dahmer is concerned, it can be due to the relatability of men to the male loneliness

syndrome that Jeffrey Dahmer was passing through. All of these are due to the rising empathy for such characters. Recent literature also supports that empathy for serial killers is being generated in viewers far more than for any other character.

Krammer (2023) in the article "From Trauma to Entertainment: An Examination of Netflix's "Dahmer – Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story" Series explores the role of Netflix in commercializing and making money out of the victims and their families' sufferings without consent and cherry on top in the name of giving them a voice through these depictions. The author's focus is on the "Dahmer-Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story" series. After viewing from a critical lens, the author states that while acting, cinematography and attention to details are praiseworthy, however, the social and cultural motive behind this production and others of this type are vague and more of a commercial nature rather than novelty. The author urges the need to scholarly examine such representations through an ethical lens and to carefully investigate the consequences of popularization and potential romanticization of such portrayals. Also, the insensitive portrayals of victims should be avoided at all costs.

McCabe (2021) in her article "Conversations with a serial killer: the ted bundy tapes and affective responses to the true crime documentary" explores viewers' perspective of the Ted Bundy representation. Majority of the responses showed disappointment over the nowhere-found novelty of the documentary, and its effort to maintain and add to the mythos and glory of the serial killer. According to them, this documentary did exactly what the serial killer would have wanted to do. The author also points out a number of people who didn't want to view the documentary as it would elevate the killer's place in culture. The inability of the docu-series to bring novelty, attempts to recreate and emphasize killer's place in popular culture, giving him a voice in the series and minimal victims' presence didn't sit well with the critics and public. While these reviews give a unique perspective on how viewers' digest these stories, it cannot be understood as representing the entirety of population.

Das and Cecil (2022) analyzed the phenomenon of sensationalism through textual content analysis in 3 fiction films, Zodiac, Iceman and Silence of the Lambs.

After a thorough analysis, it was found that these films made use of sensationalist narrative techniques such as gore visualization which dehumanizes victims, personal life details of killers, their family oriented attitudes, and family dynamics rather than focusing on a probe-oriented neutral approach to their psychological motivations. Also their lives and their actions are glorified and glamorized as if they are are some sort of celebrity figures.

2.7 Theoretical Discussion

Frame Semantics

Semantics is taken as the relation between linguistic forms and their meanings (distinct from semantics as a scheme for meaning representations). Thus, semantic analysis proper is the process or activity of showing how features of meaning are anchored in features of linguistic form. The language analyst can see this relationship from either direction. It has a decoding or semasiological aspect, by which the semantic import of linguistic structures is explained, and an encoding or onomasiological aspect, by which concepts are examined with respect to the ways in which they can be linguistically expressed. In Frame Semantics in particular, the meaning dimension is expressed in terms of the cognitive structures (frames) that shape speakers' understanding of linguistic expressions.

Thus Frame Semantics is the study of how linguistic forms evoke or activate frame knowledge, and how the frames thus activated can be integrated into an understanding of the passages that contain these forms. With respect to the lexicon, we say that each lexical unit, the pairing of a word with one of its meanings (Cruse 1986), evokes a frame and profiles some aspect or component of that frame. when we understand a word, we must simultaneously recognize the relevance of the background information within which that word plays an interpretive role (Fillmore 2003).

The basic assumption of Frame Semantics, in respect to word meanings, is that not just words from technical domains but essentially all content words require for their understanding an appeal to the background frames within which the meaning they convey is motivated and interpreted. The background knowledge assigned to frames is often so thoroughly 'overlearned' that considerable cognitive

effort is sometimes required to bring it to consciousness. lexical units all call on shared background conceptualizations and are best learned, and understood, in packages, large or small.

According to Fillmore (1982), Frame semantics offers a particular way of looking at word meanings, as well as a way of characterizing principles for creating new words and phrases, for adding new meanings to words, and for assembling the meanings of elements in a text into the total meaning of the text. By the term 'frame' means a system of concepts related in such a way that to understand any one of them you have to understand the whole structure in which it fits; when one of the things in such a structure is introduced into a text, or into a conversation, all of the others are automatically made available.

Frame semantics links to people's comprehension process, that is, how we understand meanings in context. Lexical meaning and grammatical characteristics "both with information about related words and with our general cultural knowledge about the world" (Goddard 1998: 69) work together in our comprehension process. The meaning of a word can be understood only against a background frame of experience, beliefs, or practices that motivate the concept that the word encodes (Fillmore and Atkins 1992).

Types of Frames

Sullivan (2023) has distinguished among three types of framing. These three types of framing are here characterized as focusing on (1) language, (2) cognition, and (3) communication. These three types are referred to as semantic framing, cognitive framing, and communicative framing, respectively. In Linguistics, the original "case frames" in Fillmore (1968) led to approaches that focus on the semantic requirements of individual words (that is, semantic framing), such as the fact that the word rob implies the existence of a perpetrator and a victim.

Fillmore recognizes the division between cognitive frames and semantic frames, though he calls the latter "linguistic frames" (Andor, 2010; Fillmore, 2008) or "linguistically anchored frames" (Fillmore & Baker, 2009). Fillmore clearly defines the two types in his 2008 book chapter "The Merging of 'Frames'", and redefines them to some extent the next year (Fillmore & Baker, 2009). However, his

terminology for the types has not been consistent over the course. In earlier works, Fillmore sometimes discriminates the two by referring to cognitive frames as "scenes," reserving "frames" for semantic frames (Fillmore, 1975, 1976, 1977). By 1985, Fillmore had abandoned this use of 'scene' (Petruck, 2022). The distinction between cognitive frames and semantic frames remains implicit in his writing, but not overt in his choice of terminology, until 2008.

Like many linguists, Fillmore focuses on semantic and cognitive frames. However, the existence of communicative frames is implied in his work. Fillmore (1982) argues that "the same 'facts' can be presented within different framings, framings which make them out as different 'facts'" (1982, p. 125). His examples include the contrast between the words thrifty and stingy, which describe the same anti spending behavior but make different assumptions about values. That is, thrifty assumes that saving money is admirable and wastage is to be frowned upon, whereas stingy implies that spending money can be beneficial and unwillingness to do so can be a negative trait. By using someone else's choice of words, such as stingy rather than thrifty, you "accept their framing of the issue," as Lakoff puts it (1996, p. 410). To reject the framing imposed by stingy, and the assumption that spending is advantageous, you must choose a word with different assumptions, such as thrifty. Fillmore's "different framings" therefore fall within the category here termed communicative frames. Most researchers focusing on cognitive frames or communicative frames are aware of the role of language in these types of framing. For example, Entman (1993) writes that communicative frames "are manifested by the presence or absence of certain key words, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences (p. 52). Similarly, van Gorp (2010) distinguishes between cognitive frames, which he terms a "reasoning device," and the words that evoke cognitive frames in the sense of Fillmore (2008, p. 2), which van Gorp calls "lexical choices" within the "framing device". Linguists, sociologists and others have succeeded in extricating semantic frames from cognitive frames; and cognitive frames from communicative frames. In general, Fillmore and his followers have focused on semantic and cognitive frames, whereas Goffman's followers have been interested in cognitive and communicative frames. When a phenomenon—such as metaphor or framing—exists in cognition but can be communicated to others,

these three levels are a natural consequence. We have to be able to think about something to communicate about it, and of course, much of our communication involves language. Cognitive structures will therefore often develop communicative and linguistic counterparts.

Of the three types of frames, semantic frames were the first to be called frames, insofar as they are the direct descendants of Fillmore's case frames (Fillmore, 1968). The theory and practice of semantic frames continues to evolve, as reflected by the projects and events listed by Global FrameNet, for example (FrameNet Brasil, 2023). Generally speaking, semantic frames specify the semantic requirements of words and other linguistic forms (FrameNet, 2023; Ruppenhofer et al., 2016). In contrast, cognitive frames are open-ended structures consisting of the background knowledge necessary to understand a concept. Finally, communicative frames arise when cognitive frames are encoded in language, art, or another medium, causing the cognitive frames to be created or activated in someone else's mind. These levels of framing are not only interrelated; some types are existentially dependent on others. For example, communicative frames could not exist without cognitive frames, since cognitive frames are the mechanisms by which communicative frames influence thought. Semantic frames also rely on cognitive frames. Without an underlying conceptual organization of experience, semantic frames that require specific aspects of this experience to be encoded could not occur. Although communicative frames do not require semantic frames (and can involve other communicative resources such as art), in practice most communicative frames include language, and therefore semantic frames.

The "cognitive frames" explicitly recognized in Fillmore's later work (Andor, 2010; Fillmore, 2008; Fillmore & Baker, 2009) are probably the best-known type of frames in Linguistics, since these appear in Lakoff's work (1996) and some of Fillmore's seminal publications (1982), though Fillmore does not call them cognitive frames until much later. In 1982, Fillmore defines a frame of this type as: any system of concepts related in such a way that to understand any one of them you have to understand the whole structure in which it fits; when one of the things in such a structure is introduced into a text, or into a conversation, all of the others are automatically made available. (Fillmore, 1982, p.111)

Cognitive frames are essential to language, since we rely on them to understand words such as birthday or year, or indeed most other words. They are also necessary background for semantic frames. In an interview near the end of Fillmore's life, he explains the relation between cognitive frames and semantic ("linguistic") frames (Andor, 2010, p. 158):

Cognitive frames are those background understandings needed for making sense of things that happen around us, and linguistic frames are those that are specifically coded in—or "evoked by"—lexical units or other features of linguistic form. (Andor, 2010, p. 158) Many of our thoughts can be communicated through language, art etc. Communicative frames are therefore the most complex type of frame, followed by cognitive frames, trailed by semantic frames.

Entman (1993) defines this type of frame in the following way:

To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described (p. 52). The aspects of the perceived reality are the structures, here called cognitive frames.

Many other factors shape the salience of communicative frames. For example, audiences are more likely to activate a frame when it comes from a trusted source (Druckman, 2001b; Miller & Krosnick, 2000). Frames that are communicated visually, for example, will have different effects than frames that are encoded in language, or which are expressed both visually and linguistically (Edell & Staelin, 1983; Kamins & Marks, 1987).

Frame invocation is a cognitive act that the interpreter (possibly quite unconsciously) performs to make sense of some incoming information. By contrast, frame evocation is a cognitive experience on the part of an interpreter that comes about by the interpreter's responding to language-specific associations connecting linguistic signs with particular frames. The discovery and analysis of such associations, those acquired as a part of learning the language, constitute Frame Semantics. Frame Semantics as the study of how, as a part of our knowledge of the language, we associate linguistic forms (words, fixed phrases, grammatical patterns)

with the cognitive structures—the frames—which largely determine the process (and the result) of interpreting those forms.

2.8 Conclusion

From the origin of true crime genre from pamphlets to newspapers, fiction/non-fiction novels and finally to film media, the representation of criminals particularly serial killers has changed from presenting them as evil monsters to normal human beings alongside as genius manipulators with a humanistic side, such depictions directly or indirectly glorify and romanticize them. With the rise in popularity of true crime genre in the last decade, various important questions are being raised about the influence and persuasive nature of film media. As serial killer stories are about real people, an insensitive approach towards the victims is being adopted by highlighting the humanistic and positive sides of serial killers by portraying them as handsome men, leading to their idolization and roamnticization. Emphasizing their charming personality and faces is itself extremely problematic. In addition, the abundance of on-screen violence can lead to greater real life tolerance of such behavior. And lack of ethical considerations about the suffering of victims and their families also raises serious eyebrows.

While the literature review provides a comprehensive overview of the history, evolution, and impact of serial killer portrayals in true crime narratives, several research gaps remain, especially in the field of linguistics. Most notably, there is a lack of detailed linguistic analysis of the dialogues and narrative structures used in these documentaries and films. Understanding these could provide deeper insights into how serial killers are portrayed in media for which it is essential to analyze a broader range of documentaries. Focusing on just one or two documentaries can provide valuable insights but may not capture the full spectrum of narrative techniques and linguistic strategies employed across the genre. An ample sample size would allow for a more robust analysis, identifying common patterns and variations in how serial killers are depicted. Analyzing multiple documentaries can also highlight how different filmmakers approach the subject matter, revealing the diversity of narrative styles and framing techniques. This can uncover the extent to which individual films contribute to the overall phenomenon of romanticizing and

humanizing serial killers. The unique linguistic and narrative combination not only fills the void of a thorough linguistic analysis in previous studies but also points out important suggestions and recommendations for future attempts at such portrayals.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological framework adopted for the present study, which investigates the romanticization of serial killers in selected documentaries. Since the focus of this research is on exploring how language, mainly along with narrative strategies, constructs sympathy, charm, and celebrification around killers while sidelining victims, a qualitative research design was deemed most appropriate. Within this design, a semantic frame analysis was employed to critically examine how stories are linguistically constructed and meanings are shaped in the documentaries. The chapter provides a detailed explanation of the research design, data collection methods, sampling, data analysis techniques etc.

3.2 Research Paradigm

This study falls under the interpretivist paradigm by assuming that reality is socially constructed and mediated through discourse. This study does not take language as a neutral vehicle of communication but as a meaning-making resource that frames the phenomenon of romanticization. Thus, by applying semantic frame analysis, this study explores how linguistic choices activate broader communication frames that may contribute to romanticize serial killers in true crime documentaries.

3.3 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the romanticization of serial killers in true crime documentaries. Since the primary aim is to deconstruct portrayals and uncover the linguistic strategies that shape problematic yet appealing images of criminals, qualitative inquiry provides the most suitable framework. The design allows for detailed, descriptive, and interpretive insights rather than numerical measurement, which aligns with the study's focus on meaning-making practices. In line with this, the research is cross-sectional in nature,

as it investigates selected data from a particular time frame without tracing changes across an extended period.

The study is grounded in a linguistic and narrative dimension, and to support this orientation, Fillmore's Frame Semantic Framework (1982) is adopted as the guiding analytical lens. This framework enables the researcher to identify the semantic frames through which documentaries construct celebrification, sympathy, and charm around serial killers while sidelining victims. By applying this theoretical perspective, the study ensures a systematic and coherent way of interpreting the language of the documentaries.

The data sample consists of five Netflix documentaries centered on infamous serial killers. Given the abundance of multimodal content in such documentaries, only the linguistic data (subtitles) was selected for analysis. This decision keeps the study focused, manageable, and consistent with its linguistic objectives, while visual elements were excluded to avoid excessive data and remain within the study's scope. Overall, the chosen design provides a structured plan that aligns the research aim, theoretical framework, and data selection, while the subsequent sections will detail the theoretical framework, specific data collection strategies and analysis procedures.

3.4 Theoretical Framework

Frame Semantics

Frame Semantics refers to one's knowledge of language, where one associates language forms (words, fixed phrases, grammatical patterns) with cognitive frames, largely determining the process of interpreting those forms.

Frame semantics, as defined by Fillmore (1982), looks at word meanings and also characterizes new principles for communicating the meanings of individual elements in text to its total meaning. By the term Frame, Fillmore has a system of concepts. And to understand one of them, one has to understand the whole structure and when one thing is introduced, the rest become automatically available. Frame Semantics sees the set of interpretive frames a language provides as offering alternative "ways of seeing things." Interpretive frames represent the particular organization of knowledge that is a prerequisite to understanding the meanings of the associated words.

Some critical elements of Fillmore's understanding of semantic frames are:

1. **Frames**

Fillmore proposed that our knowledge about the world is organized into mental structures called frames. Frames represent stereotypical situations, scenarios, or events, including information about the roles, attributes, and relationships associated with a particular concept.

2. **Lexical Units and Frame Elements**

Fillmore introduced the concept of frame elements to explain how different lexical units (words or expressions) contribute to the activation of frames. Each linguistic/lexical unit has associated frame elements that correspond to roles or attributes within a frame.

3. **Roles, Attributes, and Relationships**

Within a semantic frame, some roles represent the participants or entities involved, attributes that describe the characteristics or properties, and relationships that specify how these roles and attributes interact in a given situation.

4. **Context-Dependent Meaning**

The meaning of words and expressions is context-dependent, and understanding them involves activating the relevant frames. Different frames can be activated depending on the context, leading to nuanced interpretations.

5. **Frame Evocation**:

Words or expressions evoke frames in the minds of speakers and listeners.

Fillmore (1982) has focused more on semantic and cognitive frames. However, the existence of communicative frames is also implied in his work. He also argues that the same facts can be presented within different framings, framings which make them out as different facts. These different framings, according to Fillmore come under the umbrella of communicative frames. Semantic frames consider communication and understanding, the primary functions of linguistic units. Furthermore, semantic frames do not exist alone, rather they work with cognitive frames and make way for communicative frames. Fillmore has described the

cognitive frames as the background contextual necessities which are required for making sense of things occurring around us.

The theoretical framework, rooted in Semantic Frames, lays the groundwork for a nuanced exploration of how information is crafted through language and then presented in contemporary true crime documentaries focusing on serial killers. The concept of frames, operating at semantic, cognitive, and communicative levels, offers a comprehensive lens through which to analyze the multimodal aspects of these documentaries. This foundational layer sets the stage for an intricate interplay with cognitive frames, where linguistic choices within the semantic frames become pivotal in activating background understandings necessary for audience comprehension.

In this study, the linguistic choices within semantic frames evoke cognitive frames and contribute to the formation of communicative frames. The communicative frames, manifested through linguistic elements such as keywords and phrases, shape how the narrative is presented to the audience. This interlinked process influences how serial killers are portrayed, potentially contributing to the overall framing of their characters and actions. Thus, the theoretical framework provides a cohesive structure for understanding how linguistic choices within semantic frames interact with cognitive and communicative frames, ultimately influencing serial killers' portrayal and potential romanticization in true crime documentaries.

Although Charles Fillmore's Semantic Frames Framework dates back to early 1980s, however, its role as a highly relevant and robust tool cannot be denied for examining the role of language in meaning constructions. The central premise of frame semantics, that words evoke conceptual structures or "frames" that guide interpretation, aligns directly with the objectives of this study and is highly useful to explore the ways these documentaries romanticize serial killers.

The continuing relevance of the framework is demonstrated by the establishment of **Frame Net**, an ongoing digital lexicographic database that catalogues frames and their associated lexical units. The fact that FrameNet is still actively maintained and used in both computational and linguistic research

reinforces that Fillmore's model is not outdated but rather adaptable and enduring. This indicates that frame semantics continues to serve as a foundation for both theoretical and applied linguistic inquiry.

However, this study deliberately employs manual analysis rather than computational or machine-assisted methods for several reasons. Firstly, the manual analysis captures contextual cues, tone shifts, and phrases better than machine analysis. The Frame Net database attempts to analyze surface-level frames and triggers, while manual analysis focuses on implicit frames, adjectives evaluation. It also offers greater control, reflexivity, and critical engagement with data that machine analysis fails to do.

In short, this framework brings all the components to be analyzed in this study together. It not only helps the study to be linguistic but also helps construct the broader communication strategies employed in documentaries to highlight romanticization. And to examine the narrative strategies, the researcher does not need to bring out a separate narrative framework, Semantic Frames framework carries the job smoothly by recognizing the recurring patterns within the documentaries employed by the documentary makers.

To conclude, the said framework was the most appropriate and practical choice for examining the role of language in constructing the characters of serial killers in true crime documentaries.

3.5 Analytical Framework: A Frames Approach to Semantic Analysis

Semantics is the relation between linguistic units and their corresponding meanings, and semantic analysis proper is the detailed exploration of how features of meaning are presented through these linguistic forms. In Frame Semantics, the meaning dimension is usually expressed through cognitive frames that shape any speaker's proper understanding of these linguistic forms.

Hence the evocation of frames is also a cognitive experience that is evoked through specific language associations that connect linguistic units with related frames. The discovery and analysis of such associations, acquired as a part of

learning the language, constitutes Frame Semantics. Thus, Frame Semantics is the study of how linguistic forms evoke or activate frame knowledge and how the frames thus activated can be integrated into an understanding of the sentences/passages that contain these forms. With respect to the lexicon, we say that each *lexical unit*, the pairing of a word with one of its meanings, *evokes* a frame and *profiles* some aspect or component of that frame.

The basic assumption of Frame Semantics, with respect to word meanings, is that not just words from technical domains but essentially *all* content words require for their understanding an appeal to the background frames within which the meaning they convey is motivated and interpreted.

Data analysis is carried out on a sentence level containing a coherent message. These sentences are assigned to the related category then manual analysis is carried out. First of all, the lexical units evoking the particular semantic frames are identified for the relative sentence. After that, the evocation of semantic frames, along with the contextual situation in which that semantic frame is being implied, occurs. After that, the evocation of conceptual background (cognitive frames) is analyzed. After this process, the overall intended communication of the frame is discussed, first on an individual level and later on collective grounds. In the end, the overall data analysis compares and points out the specific themes and narrative patterns that are being applied to shape a romanticized and normalized image of serial killers in all the selected true crime documentaries.

3.6 Sample for the Present Study

Data for this study consists of five true crime documentaries available on Netflix that specifically feature serial killers. The selected documentaries are The Night Stalker: The Hunt for a Serial Killer, Conversation with a Serial Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes, Conversation with a Serial Killer: The Jeffrey Dahmer Tapes, Conversation with a Serial Killer: John Gacy Tapes and The Sons of Sam: A Descent into the Darkness. This selection aims to capture a diverse range of cases and styles to ensure a comprehensive analysis. Data includes transcripts of verbal content, within the chosen documentaries, to analyze the semantic frames and to further look

at how the evoked cognitive frames play their role in communicating the underlying message.

Rationale for Selecting the Serial Killers

Ted Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmer, Richard Ramirez, David Berkowitz, and John Wayne Gacy were selected because they are among the most well-known serial killers whose narratives continue to shape popular culture. Recent Netflix docuseries released between 2019 and 2022 have revived public interest in these figures, often presenting detailed personal stories that carry a strong potential for romanticization and celebrification. These documentaries gained wide global viewership and critical recognition, making them influential cultural texts. Selecting these specific serial killers allows the study to critically examine how contemporary true crime narratives construct the identity, appeal, and sympathy of serial killers while marginalizing victims.

3.7 Data Collection

Data in the form of subtitles was downloaded from an authentic website opensubtitles.org as SRT files which stands for SubRib subtitle file and it is a plain text file that contains the timing (when subtitles should appear and disappear on screen) and the subtitles themselves (the spoken dialogue or captions). The text is these file was then searched for relevant and required data.

Data Source and Reliability

The data for this study was collected from Netflix true crime docuseries, with subtitles used as the primary textual source. Subtitles were obtained from a widely used subtitle repository and were cross-checked with the original documentary audio to ensure accuracy and consistency. As professionally produced and widely circulated media texts, Netflix documentaries provide reliable and credible data, while the use of subtitles ensures systematic and replicable linguistic and narrative analysis.

3.8 The Rationale for Taking Sample Data

The rationale for taking documentaries as sample data for this study lies in their unique nature as films of presumptive assertion (Carroll, 1988). Documentaries present not only factual information but also inherently make claims about the events they are depicting, thus shaping the specific narrative or interpretation of the subject matter at hand. This makes them an ideal medium to analyze their portrayals of serial killers in popular culture.

By making implicit claims about their subject matter, these documentaries actively contribute to how these serial killers are perceived by the audience. The presumptive assertions of these documentaries are usually influenced by the filmmaker's viewpoint about the subject matter, which potentially leads to biased or romanticized portrayals that can influence public attitudes. Consequently, examining the data of these documentaries allows for a deeper understanding of how language and narrative structure combine to shape interpretations of serial killers, hence making them a powerful tool to explore in detail the romanticization and normalization of such figures in film media.

True crime documentaries also have a wide viewership and have an ability to significantly shape public understanding and attitudes. Given the complex and sensitive nature of the subject, the linguistic aspects of these documentaries will provide valuable insights into how the media frames and communicates information about serial killers. A focus on the linguistic elements within the docu-series, the study also aims to dig the patterns of framing which contributes to the potential romanticization of serial killers in these documentaries. The rationale for selecting serial killer documentaries as sample data lies in their time frame, ratings, tendency to romanticize, and their respective influence on popular culture narratives.

Time Frame

The documentaries selected for this study are chosen within the time frame of their release which is from 2019 to 2022, hence ensuring their relevance and appropriateness for contemporary analysis. This period also captures recent societal attitudes, perceptions, and cultural trends surrounding serial killers, offering a current and accurate portrayal of public fascination with these individuals.

Ratings

The selection of these documentaries is also based on their ratings on IMDb, which is a widely recognized platform to assess the quality and popularity of films and documentaries. These are the documentaries with high IMDb ratings, which typically indicate positive audience reception and critical declaration. The chosen documentaries fall within a specific range of IMDb ratings, ranging between 7.0 to 7.7.

Potential for Romanticization

One convincing reason for selecting these specific documentaries lies in their potential to unintentionally romanticize serial killers. Popular culture has a trend to sensationalize and glorify the lives of such criminals, by portraying them as anti-heroes or fascinating objects. Documentaries that have gained popularity have the ability to shape public opinions and perceptions, either by sensationalizing the lives of serial killers or by offering a more detailed examination of their actions.

Place in Popular Culture

Most importantly, the documentaries selected for this study have all received prestigious award nominations, with two of them even winning awards. This recognition points out their impact and credibility within this particular genre, and also highlighting their status as influential works that deserve scholarly analysis."

Table 3.1

Documentary credentials

Documentary Title	Year of Release	Place in Popular Culture	IMDb Ratings	Potential for Romanticization
Conversation with a serial killer: Ted Bundy Tapes	2019	2020 winner for Non-Fiction - Archive-Based Program	7.7	Yes
Conversation with a serial killer: Jeffry Dahmer Tapes	2022	Winner of 2023 Best Documentary Series	7.3	Yes
Conversation with a serial killer: John Wayne Gacy Tapes	2022	2022 Nominee for Best Limited Series	7.1	Yes
Sons of Sam: A Descent into Darkness	2021	Nominated for A Real screen Award and a Hollywood Critics Association (HCA) Award (Best Streaming Docuseries)	7.0	Yes
Night Stalker: A Hunt for a Serial Killer	2021	Awarded Best Real-Life Mystery or Crime Series in 2021	7.5	Yes

3.9 Coding Process

A 'Hybrid Coding approach" is adopted which is a mixture of 'initial codes' (deductive coding) and 'line-by-line coding' (inductive coding). Initial codes are developed by the researcher keeping in line with the research objectives and by a general understanding of the research data. The initial codes are fairly broad codes that serve as a starting point for the analysis process and will be refined later by doing 'line- by-line coding' to avoid any bias and subjectivity during the process, thus also improving the reliability and validity of research. These codes or categories help to describe the data in a highly condensed manner, which will allow the researcher to quickly refer to the content.

In the present study, coding is carried out within the framework of Fillmore's Frame Semantics Theory (1982), which provides the analytical foundation for identifying semantic frames in the documentaries. The subtitles of five Netflix documentaries are examined, and specific expressions that romanticize serial killers are coded into categories such as *celebrification*, *charm and appeal*, *sympathy for the killer*, and *marginalization of victims*. By using coding as part of the data analysis procedure, the study moves beyond surface-level description and systematically uncovers the communicative frames through which the phenomenon of romanticization is constructed.

3.10 Coding Categories

In order to divide the textual data (subtitles) into manageable information, a coding scheme is generated consisting of 4 coding categories. These coding categories are built upon the requirements of the study and on the assumptions of different theorists about the concept of romanticization of serial killers or criminals. Four categories are developed here which are as under;

- Celebrity construction of serial killers
- Charm and appeal of serial killers
- Identification and sympathy with serial killers
- Victims' dehumanization and marginalization in docuseries

1. Celebrity Construction

The notion of *celebrity construction* comes directly from the celebrification of serial killers. Schmid (2005) argues that cinema plays a central role in developing a "modern celebrity system" where serial killers become media stars with unprecedented visibility and influence. Driesness (2012) and Jerslev (2014) expand on *celebrification* as a process where the media elevates individuals into celebrity figures, regardless of whether their fame stems from talent or notoriety. This assumption is particularly evident in how killers such as Ted Bundy are transformed into cultural icons whose images circulate across films, TV, podcasts, and social media. Bonn (2014) further highlights that mass media amplifies the fame of such figures, making them familiar household names. Thus, this category emerged from theoretical assumptions about the media's tendency to turn criminals into celebrity brands rather than focusing on their crimes or victims.

2. Charm and Appeal

The *charm and appeal* category is grounded in theories of aestheticization and romanticization of violence. Morrison (2009), De Quincey, and Joel Black (1991) describe how murder has historically been framed as an art form, where perpetrators are seen as "artists of destruction." Schneider (2001) similarly argues that cinematic depictions aestheticize murder by presenting killers as intelligent, mysterious, or even elegant. Grønstad (2008) adds that stylistic techniques make violent scenes visually beautiful, thereby aligning audiences with perpetrators rather than victims. This framework is also reinforced by portrayals like Hannibal Lecter, who embodies sophistication and aesthetic taste while committing atrocities (Allue, 2002). Hence, the assumption that cinematic techniques emphasize killers' sophistication and charisma rationalizes the emergence of this category.

3. Sympathy and Identification

The *sympathy and identification* category is based on Murray Smith's (1995) "structure of sympathy" model, which outlines recognition, alignment, and allegiance as stages of audience engagement. Through these stages, viewers move from simply recognizing the killer to aligning with their perspective, and finally to developing allegiance—even when their actions are immoral. Smith (2011) extends

this to describe "partial" and "perverse" allegiances, showing how audiences can sympathize with villains who are portrayed as vulnerable or humanized. Bonn (2014) adds that audiences project their own darker sides into these portrayals, using killers as a safe outlet for repressed emotions. These assumptions explain why documentaries often highlight killers' backstories, vulnerabilities, and traumas, creating sympathy and emotional identification that outweigh their brutality.

4. Victim Marginalization and Dehumanization

The *victim marginalization* category arises from the assumption that when killers are the center of narrative focus, victims are systematically sidelined. Wiest (2021) emphasizes that crime narratives often reduce victims to mere statistics or background figures, stripping them of individuality and human connection. Bonn (2014) also notes that when killers are framed as "celebrity monsters," the horrors faced by victims and families are overshadowed. Thus, the assumption that media framing privileges killers over victims provides the foundation for this category, which captures how victims are silenced and dehumanized in narratives.

3.11 Data Analysis Procedure

The data analysis is grounded in Fillmore's (1982) Frame Semantics, with a particular focus on semantic frames and how linguistic units evoke them. Also, the interplay of semantic frames with that of cognitive and communicative frames, as previously discussed is also explored as to how these elements have collectively contributed to the portrayal of serial killers and their potential romanticization.

After developing the above-mentioned categories, the data is carefully and thoroughly looked for the required semantic information to put under the suitable coding category. Data analysis is done on the level of sentences containing a message about one of any categories. After being assigned to the related category, the final analysis is carried out. Firstly, the particular 'frame' is identified for the relative sentence keeping in mind the contextual information which is the most important part, with the help of the particular linguistic units which have evoked the conceptual background i.e, cognitive frames. Then, the overall communication of the frames is discussed. Narrative framing has also been explored, first for individual documentaries and then on collective grounds, are identified and analyzed. In the

end, the overall data analysis is carried out that helps in comparing and pointing out the specific patterns and narrative techniques across all 5 documentaries, which have been applied to portray a romanticized and normalized depiction of serial killers in true crime documentaries.

Developing Categories

↓

Assigning data to relevant category

↓

Identification of linguistic units

↓

Frame evocation

↓

Interpreting communicative frame

↓

Examining Narrative Framing

↓

Comparative Analysis
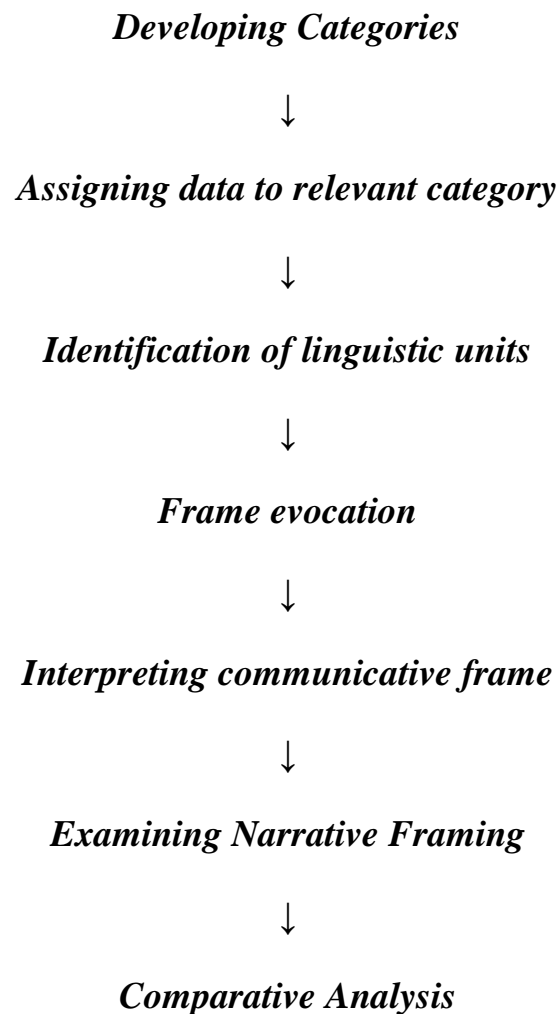
3.12 Conclusion

This chapter outlines the methodological framework used to analyze the portrayal of serial killers in true crime documentaries. The study employs framing theory to examine how linguistic and narrative choices shape public perception. Frame semantics, as developed by Fillmore, serves as a key analytical tool to identify how semantic, cognitive, and communicative frames contribute to meaning-

making within these narratives. The study also explores theoretical perspectives on romanticization, investigating how media representations often construct serial killers as complex, charismatic figures rather than focusing solely on their crimes.

For data collection, five Netflix documentaries were selected based on specific criteria, including their release time frame, audience ratings, potential for romanticization. Transcripts of these documentaries serve as primary data, which are analyzed through a structured coding scheme to identify key framing techniques. The data analysis process involves a detailed examination of linguistic patterns and narrative techniques, that contribute to these framings. A comparative approach is used to identify recurring themes and techniques across all five documentaries. Through this approach, the study aims to provide insight into how true crime documentaries contribute to the normalization and glorification of serial killers while shaping public discourse around crime and justice.

CHAPTER 4

DATA ANALYSIS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the overall analysis and interpretation of the selected data. It aims to explore how various linguistic and narrative elements contribute to the portrayal of serial killers in the selected documentaries. A total of 5 documentaries are taken as a data sample, and their text (subtitles) is taken as the actual data for performing analysis. These documentaries are Conversation with a Serial Killer: Ted Bundy Tapes, Conversation with a Serial Killer: John Wayne Gacy Tapes, Conversation with a Serial Killer: Jeffrey Dahmer Tapes, Night Stalker: The Hunt for a Serial Killer, and Sons of Sam: A Descent into Darkness.

The text of each documentary is analyzed using the semantic frame analysis by Fillmore. Firstly, sentences containing particular semantic frames, relevant to each of the four categories; celebrity construction, sympathy and identification, charm and appeal and victim marginalization are separated. Each excerpt is given a number, for instance, D1C1E1 where D1 stands for documentary one, similarly C1 for category one and E1 for excerpt no 1. The five documentaries and their respective four categories are numbered below.

D1: Conversation with a Serial Killer: Ted Bundy Tapes D2: Conversation with a Serial Killer: Jeffrey Dahmer Tapes, D3: Conversation with a Serial Killer: John Wayne Gacy Tapes, D4: Night Stalker: The Hunt for a Serial Killer, D5: Sons of Sam: A Descent into Darkness.

C1: Celebrity Construction, C2: Charm and Appeal, C3: Identification and Sympathy, C4: Victim Marginalization.

Also for each excerpt, it is mentioned whether it is said by the subject (serial killer) itself or not. After that the linguistic units and the semantic frames are discussed and linked with the broader communicative message being conveyed. For each documentary, all four categories are discussed separately with the narrative techniques used to reinforce the respective portrayals. At the end of the chapter, a

comparative analysis is done to collectively look for the recurrent themes and patterns, working behind the curtains and potentially romanticizing the serial killers' representation.

4.2 Semantic Frames in Conversation with a Serial Killer: Ted Bundy Tapes

The Ted Bundy Tapes offers a chilling exploration of one of America's most infamous serial killers, Ted Bundy. The documentary features never-before-heard audio recordings of Bundy himself, providing a rare and unsettling glimpse into his psyche. Through these tapes, combined with archival footage and interviews with law enforcement, survivors, and journalists, the series traces Bundy's crimes, his manipulative charm, and his ability to evade capture for years. The documentary not only recounts the gruesome details of his murders but also examines the societal fascination with Bundy, shedding light on how his charisma and intelligence allowed him to deceive so many.

4.2.1 Celebrity Construction of Ted Bundy

D1C1E1: *Ted Bundy, famous serial killer, had sent a message out that he was willing to speak exclusively with a journalist.*

Famous serial killer: Here a semantic frame of fame and recognition is being evoked and Bundy is presented as the figure having above mentioned traits.

Exclusively with a journalist: Here these words activate the frame of privilege, and Bundy's message is compared with that of a high-profile interview.

Overall, Bundy is being portrayed as a person who was very well aware of his fame and took benefit of it to control and manipulate how his narrative should reach to public.

D1C1E2: *People were trying all over the world to get with Bundy.*

Trying all over the world: These words frame Bundy as a figure of international interest and point out his global character.

"Get with Bundy": Here Bundy is being framed as a figure who is in demand.

Overall, Bundy is being portrayed as a figure of fascination and to some extent obsession, even going beyond national boundaries.

D1C1E3: The mystery, the aura of the most infamous accused mass killer in the country.

Mystery and **aura**: Bundy is framed here as a mysterious and attractive figure, which highlights his importance.

Most infamous accused mass killer: Here a frame of unrivalled fame is being activated, which elevates Bundy's profile. It has also enhanced his horrifying and captivating presence.

Overall, Bundy is being established as a figure larger than life whose charm lies in his self-contradictory nature.

D1C1E4: Ted Bundy was now more than just another suspect; he was a notorious name across multiple states.

More than just another suspect: These words frame Bundy as an exceptional one among other criminals.

Notorious name across multiple states: Again a frame of widespread infamy is evoked, which emphasizes Bundy's reach and recognition.

It also elevates Bundy from an ordinary criminal to a cultural icon of infamy. It also presents Bundy as a figure synonymous with fear.

D1C1E5: Ted was a legend in his own time zone.

Legend: Here it frames Bundy as an iconic figure, merging his fame with that of historical significance.

In his own time zone: Here a frame of general fame is activated.

Overall, these frames position Bundy as a figure whose reputation went far beyond orthodox criminals. Bundy's ability to capture both regional and national audiences, strengthens his celebrity status.

D1C1E6: Everybody realized that there was somebody very special being held by the police in Tallahassee.

Somebody very special: Here Bundy is framed as a unique person who is different from typical suspects.

It also casts Bundy as a figure of public interest and owning special status, even by the law enforcement agencies.

D1C1E7: We had the media from all 50 states and nine foreign countries in big numbers. It was an unprecedented filming of a trial of this nature.

Unprecedented filming: These words frame Bundy's trial as groundbreaking in its media coverage.

All 50 states and nine foreign countries: Here a frame of global attention and interest is activated.

Overall, Bundy's trial is positioned as a cultural event, further solidifying his status as a global figure. It also highlights the scale of public and media fascination, framing Bundy as a subject of international spectacle.

D1C1E8: People were watching it play out every day during the trial, drawn by a fascination with Theodore Bundy himself.

Fascination with Theodore Bundy: Here these words frame Bundy as the focal point of the ongoing trial, overshadowing the crimes themselves.

Watching it play out every day: Here a frame of serialized entertainment is activated, emphasizing the trial's captivating nature.

Overall, Bundy is depicted as a charismatic figure whose presence commands attention, transforming a criminal trial into a spectacle. It also reinforced the idea of Bundy as a media phenomenon, captivating audiences beyond the courtroom.

D1C1E9: Ted Bundy is the Jack the Ripper of the United States.

Jack the Ripper: Here Bundy is framed as one of the historical parallel, aligning him with another infamous killer.

Of the United States: Activates a frame of national infamy, solidifying Bundy's place in American history.

On a broader level, Bundy's status is elevated by linking him to an another criminal figure of terror and mystery. Also, Bundy is framed as a symbol of American criminal infamy, which is comparable to historical legends.

4.2.2 Charm and Appeal

D1C2E1: I consider him a friend, he was a very nice person.

Friend and **nice person**: These words actively frame Bundy as a relatable and likable person by his close people, which emphasizes his ability to form interpersonal connections.

Overall it Positions Bundy as someone who is capable of making genuine relationships. Which in turn reinforces Bundy's presentable nature and complicates his image as one that is purely evil.

D1C2E2: Ted presented himself as just a Boy Scout. Boyishly handsome, smooth-talking, and people really fell for him.

Boy Scout and boyishly handsome:
These descriptions frame Bundy as having a wholesome and approachable personality.

Smooth-talking: This activates a frame of charisma about having good verbal

skills.

Overall, it puts emphasis on Bundy's ability to win over people with his behavior, which is in deep contrast with his darker nature. It also highlights Bundy's calculated use of his charm as a tool for manipulating people around him.

D1C2E3: He could always strike up a dialogue. These people accepted him.

Strike up a dialogue: This phrase frames Bundy as a person who is socially adept and engaging with other people.

Accepted him: This activates a frame of inclusion and trust.

Overall, it suggests that Bundy's charm made it easy for him to integrate and manipulate social situations, which reinforces Bundy's skill in building trust and likability.

D1C2E4: He was handsome, well-spoken, polite.

Handsome and **polite**: The use of such adjectives here frames Bundy as a physically appealing and socially refined personality.

Well-spoken: And here a frame of intelligence and eloquence is activated.

These adjectives highlight the conflicting nature of Bundy's outward charm and his criminal actions and frame Bundy's appearance and demeanor as key elements of his appeal and adept nature.

D1C2E5: Ted presented himself as a clean-cut, boy-next-door type and he had a following in the courtroom that gave him a lot of confidence.

Clean-cut, boy-next-door: The use of positive adjectives here frame Bundy as a relatable and non-threatening figure to literally anybody.

A following in the courtroom: And here a frame of popularity and public admiration is evoked.

In short, Bundy is portrayed as someone who thrived on attention and used his charm to maintain his unwavering confidence. It also highlights Bundy's ability to project innocence and win people over.

D1C2E6: My secretary at the time was a young lady who had dated him. He seemed like, uh, one of us, if you will. (third-party)

One of us: Here Bundy is framed as a relatable and familiar person.

Dated him: This activates a frame of personal connection and showing his appeal to women.

Overall, it suggests Bundy's ability to blend into ordinary social circles, successfully masking his true nature. Also it reinforces the duality of Bundy's outward normalcy and his inner darkness.

D1C2E7: He doesn't look like the type to kill somebody.

Doesn't look like: Frames Bundy as deceptive in his appearance to common public.

On a broader level, it highlights the contrast between Bundy's harmless appearance and his actions, enhancing his mystique. It further frames Bundy's disarming looks as a key component of his ability to evade any suspicion.

D1C2E8: He was always calm, polite, with a big grin.

Calm and **polite**: Here we get the description of Bundy as a composed and approachable person.

Big grin: This activates a frame of friendliness.

These, overall, portray Bundy as a likable person and as one who is in control, which further adds to his unsettling allure. Which emphasizes Bundy's ability to maintain a disarming presence in any setting.

D1C2E9: He was handsome and smooth-talking. That allowed him to do what he did.

Handsome and **smooth-talking**: These adjectives frame Bundy's physical and verbal charm as tools for manipulation.

This suggests that Bundy's success as a predator relied heavily on his outward charm and appeal. It also Highlights the danger of Bundy's outward charm as a facade for his crimes.

D1C2E10: People were drawn to him… like he had this incredible confidence.

Drawn to him: It frames Bundy as magnetic and captivating.

Incredible confidence: Here a frame of self-assurance is activated, further adding to Bundy's charm.

Overall, Bundy is portrayed as someone whose confidence enhanced his appeal and disarming nature, which he used to captivate and manipulate his victims and the public.

D1C2E11: Ted's charm and wit were evident even in his last conversations, as he would laugh and talk like a normal person.

Charm and wit: These words frame Bundy as a charismatic and engaging figure in the eyes of other people.

Laugh and talk like a normal person: This sentence activates a frame of relatability, emphasizing Bundy's human side.

In general, it positions Bundy as a complex figure whose charm persisted even in dire circumstances. It highlights his ability to maintain his appeal, complicating the perception of him as purely evil.

D1C2E12: When he really got going, his eyes went absolutely black. (3rd-party)

Eyes went absolutely black: This here frames Bundy as possessing an almost supernatural allure, blending charm with menace.

On a broader level, it suggests a transformation in Bundy's demeanor, adding an eerie element to his mystique. It also enhances Bundy's enigmatic and unsettling appeal, blending fascination with element of fear.

D1C2E13: I would almost be mesmerized for a few moments... looking at his hands. Thinking, 'My God, what did those hands do? (third-party)

Mesmerized: This frames Bundy as captivating and magnetic to other people.

What did those hands do: Here a frame of morbid curiosity is activated, linking Bundy's physical presence to his crimes.

In general, it highlights the tension between Bundy's outward charm and the violence he committed, evoking a mix of fascination and fear, which Frames Bundy as a figure who has the ability to both captivate and horrify people, a gain reinforcing his complex appeal.

4.2.3 Identification and Sympathy

D1C3E1: I felt a connection with him. A feeling of wanting to be loved.

Connection: This word Frames Bundy as a relatable person, emphasizing his ability to demand human bonds.

Wanting to be loved: Here a frame of emotional vulnerability is activated, casting Bundy in a sympathetic light.

Overall, empathy is evoked by presenting Bundy as someone capable of forming and evoking emotional connections. It also humanizes Bundy, complicating the audience's perception of him as purely monstrous.

***D1C3E2:** Our son is the best son in the world. He was a very normal, active boy.*

Best son and **normal, active boy**: These words frame Bundy as a beloved and relatable child.

Here Bundy's mother viewpoint of him successfully positions Bundy within a context of familial love and normalcy, creating a conflict that evokes curiosity and sympathy for him.

***D1C3E3:** I wanted to know what went through his mind, what led up to it.*

What went through his mind: This sentence frames Bundy's actions as ones which are psychologically complex and worth-understanding.

What led up to it: This sentence activates a frame of causality, suggesting external or internal factors shaped his behavior.

Overall, Bundy's actions are presented as the ones which require detailed explanation, hence inviting curiosity. It further encourages viewers to explore Bundy's motivations, developing a sense of intrigue and potential empathy.

***D1C3E4:** He didn't look like anybody's notion of somebody who would tear apart young girls.*

Didn't look like: Here Bundy is framed as deceptive in appearance, challenging stereotypes about criminals.

Tear apart young girls: Here a frame of brutality is activated, which contrasts sharply with Bundy's normal state.

Overall a conflict between Bundy's appearance with his actions is created, thus trying to evoke sympathy for his complex nature. Also, Bundy is framed as a mystery, that requires a deeper exploration of how these dualities are present in his character.

D1C3E5: When he was about 14 years old, in an old trunk, he found his birth certificate and in the spot where it says, 'father,' it said, 'unknown.

Father... unknown: These words frame Bundy's family background as incomplete and emotionally impactful.

Found his birth certificate: Here a frame of discovery is evoked, emphasizing the significance of that moment when Bundy found his birth certificate.

It highlights Bundy's early struggles with identity and belonging, thus evoking empathy for his challenges. It also frames Bundy's childhood experiences as significant in the formation and explanation of his later actions.

D1C3E6: I just got sick and tired of being locked up. (subject himself)

Sick and tired: Here Bundy's frustration is framed as relatable, which emphasizes his human response to his confinement.

Locked up: It activates a frame of constraint and limitation.

Overall, it humanizes Bundy by focusing upon his emotional struggles with captivity. Hence it Invites sympathy for Bundy's condition and framing his escape as a reaction to frustration rather than any evil intent.

D1C3E7: I needed somebody there. Somebody to settle me down and to help me get over this... reaction I was having being back in custody. (subject himself)

Needed somebody: It frames Bundy as a vulnerable person who is dependent on emotional support.

Reaction I was having: It activates a frame of emotional distress, thus highlighting Bundy's emotional struggles.

Overall, it portrays Bundy as emotionally fragile, thus inviting identification with his need for comfort. It also reinforces Bundy's humanistic side by depicting him as someone capable of vulnerability.

D1C3E8: He felt persecuted and embittered, insisting he was innocent despite the mounting evidence.

Persecuted and embittered: It frames Bundy as a victim of an unfair system, giving voice to his grievances.

Insisting he was innocent: It Activates a frame of defiance and self-belief, portraying Bundy as a resilient person who stands for himself.

Overall, it creates a narrative of Bundy as a misunderstood or wronged figure, thus creating curiosity about his perspective. It further elaborates Bundy's depiction by suggesting how he saw himself as a victim of injustice and took a stand for himself.

D1C3E9: The confessions came as a surprise to Bundy's mother, who still believed him to be innocent.

Surprise: It frames Bundy's confessions of his crimes as shocking and unexpected to his mother, shifting focus towards the emotional toll on Bundy's mother.

Believed him to be innocent: It evokes a frame of denial and unchanging love of family for their near and dear ones.

Overall, it highlights the contrast between reality of Bundy's criminal actions and his parent's perception of him as their son, which in turn evokes sympathy for his parents' pain. It successfully shifts attention to the emotional impact on Bundy's family, rather than on the real victims' families.

4.2.4 Victim Dehumanization and Marginalization

D1C4E1: Six skeletal remains were discovered in the mountains.

Skeletal remains: It frames the victims as some physical objects rather than individuals with actual and real lives.

Discovered in the mountains: This Activates a frame of geographical location, focusing on the place over the people.

On the whole, it reduces the victims to certain fragments of evidence, stripping away their human identity and personal stories. It also centers the narrative on the crime scene and the discovery process rather than the lives which are tragically lost, thus marginalizing the victims' identities.

D1C4E2: More than 20 young women in five states...

More than 20 young women: This also frames the victims as a collective statistic, removing their individual identities.

In five states: Here a frame of geographical scope is activated, which emphasizes the breadth of the crimes over the victims' personal stories.

Overall, it treats the victims as a group rather than unique individuals, eliminating the emotional impact of their loss. It also puts more focus on the scale of Bundy's crimes, rather than on the humanity of each victim.

D1C4E3: Their bodies dumped in hilly areas of Los Angeles.

Bodies dumped:
 Here it frames the victims as discarded objects, thus dehumanizing them.
Hilly areas of Los Angeles:
This activates a frame of location, and shifting the focus to the crime scene.

Overall, it reduces the victims to physical elements of the crime, emphasizing their disposal over their lives. And centers the narrative on the logistics of the crime rather than the victims' experiences or identities.

D1C4E4: Sexually mutilated by mouth, by teeth.

Sexually mutilated: These words frame the victims through the violence inflicted on them and reducing them to objects exposed to brutality.

By mouth, by teeth: Here it activates a clinical and graphic frame, emphasizing the method of investigation over the individual victims.

Here it objectifies the victims by focusing on the violence done to their bodies rather than their humanity. It also highlights the brutality of the crime at the expense of acknowledging the victims' personal identities.

4.2.5 Narrative Framing

The documentary constructs the serial killer Ted Bundy as a figure of paradoxical fascination—both charming and monstrous, human and inhuman. We get themes like celebrity construction and his physical and personal charm who

emphasize his ability to captivate the audiences and successfully manipulate others around him. And moments where deliberate narrative framing delves into his vulnerable side and his emotional struggles. This complexity is achieved by largely dehumanization and marginalization of victims within the narrative.

The documentary frames Ted Bundy as a figure of enduring fascination and infamy, whose crimes and trial captivated audiences worldwide. Semantic frames emphasize his control over his narrative, the unprecedented media attention, and his transformation into a cultural and historical icon. By aligning Bundy with figures like Jack the Ripper and dramatizing his trial and execution, the narrative cements his status as a legendary figure of fear and intrigue.

The documentary portrays Ted Bundy as a paradoxical figure whose outward charm, physical attractiveness, and social skills allowed him to evade suspicion and manipulate others. Semantic frames emphasize his disarming nature, composure, and wit, which made him appealing to both his victims and observers. By juxtaposing his personable demeanor with his horrific actions, the narrative deepens Bundy's enigmatic persona, presenting him as both charismatic and deeply unsettling. His charm becomes a core element of his story, amplifying his infamy and allure.

It is observed that the documentary tries to balance Bundy's monstrous actions and nature with moments of his vulnerable situation, his family's love for him, and their emotional struggle to accept it. Semantic frames like "connection," and "needed somebody" tend to humanize Bundy by focusing on his inner struggles and the damage his criminal actions has done to his family. By exploring through his upbringing, frustrations, and defiance, the narrative further constructs a complex portrayal that invites the viewers to empathize with Bundy.

The documentary consistently uses language and frames that reduce Ted Bundy's victims to numbers, evidence, and locations, marginalizing their personal identities and stories. Semantic frames like "skeletal remains," "bodies dumped," and "as many as four dead" focus on the physical aftermath and logistics of the crimes, sidelining the humanity of those who were lost. By emphasizing the scale of Bundy's actions and the forensic details of the investigation, the narrative reinforces a pattern

in true crime storytelling where victims become secondary to the spectacle of the criminal and the process of solving the case.

4.3 Semantic Frames in Conversations with a Serial Killer: Jeffrey Dahmer Tapes

The Jeffrey Dahmer Tapes provides a harrowing deep dive into the life and crimes of Jeffrey Dahmer, one of the most notorious serial killers in modern history. The documentary features chilling audio recordings of Dahmer's confessions, revealing the gruesome details of his murders, which included acts of necrophilia and cannibalism. Through interviews with law enforcement, psychiatrists, and survivors, the series explores Dahmer's troubled upbringing, his descent into depravity, and the systemic failures that allowed him to continue his killing spree for years. The documentary offers a sobering look at the dark consequences of isolation, mental illness, and societal neglect.

4.3.1 Celebrity Construction

D2C1E1: The country has been spellbound by the horrifying story of Jeffrey Dahmer.

Spellbound: It evokes a frame of enchantment and fascination, portraying Dahmer as captivating, despite the horror of his crimes.

Horrifying story: It frames his crimes as a narrative, creating an almost mythic allure around him.

Overall, Dahmer is positioned as a figure of irresistible public fascination, blending horror with intrigue to elevate him as a cultural phenomenon. It also emphasizes society's obsession with notorious figures, framing Dahmer as more than a criminal, as someone who captivates the national psyche.

D2C1E2: This is gonna be the biggest story to ever hit the city of Milwaukee.

Biggest story: This frames Dahmer's crimes as monumental, adding a historical significance to his actions.

Hit the city: This activates a frame of impact and shock, reinforcing the scale of his infamy.

Here Dahmer is portrayed as a transformative figure whose notoriety redefines the city's history, heightening his mythic status. It also highlights how the media and public sensationalized Dahmer's story, and elevated him to a larger-than-life figure.

D2C1E3: The extraordinary thing in comparing Jeffrey Dahmer to other serial killers is how he lacked defensiveness about it.

Extraordinary: Frames Dahmer as unique and fascinating.

Lacked defensiveness: Activates a frame of openness, emphasizing his distinctiveness among serial killers.

Overall, this Positions Dahmer as an exceptional figure within the realm of notorious criminals, and also reinforces his celebrity status by setting him apart from others in his "category," making him a subject of deeper fascination.

D2C1E4: The Dahmer case is something we had never seen in Milwaukee.

Never Seen: Frames Dahmer's actions as unprecedented and shocking.

The Dahmer case: Activates a frame of singularity, naming his crimes as an event with cultural and historical significance.

It Positions Dahmer as a transformative figure in the city's narrative, marking his crimes as a turning point in local history. It also frames Dahmer as a figure whose fame redefined the identity of Milwaukee, further enhancing his celebrity-like infamy.

D2C1E5: We have a serial killer in Milwaukee… it was almost unbelievable.

Serial killer: Activates a crime frame but also emphasizes his belonging to a darkly fascinating category.

Almost unbelievable: Frames Dahmer as a figure whose actions defy ordinary comprehension, amplifying his mystique.

Here a frame of shock and disbelief is reinforced, elevating Dahmer to a near- mythical status of terror. It also presents Dahmer as a figure who transformed perceptions of safety and normalcy in Milwaukee.

D2C1E6: My feeling is that I was not doing a crime scene, but I was dismantling Dahmer's museum.

Museum: Frames Dahmer's crimes as a curated, almost artistic collection, romanticizing the horror.

Dismantling: Activates a frame of deconstruction, emphasizing the scale and intricacy of his actions.

Overall Dahmer's crimes are portrayed as deliberate and significant, reinforcing his narrative as a darkly, creative and infamous. It also suggests a grim legacy, elevating Dahmer's actions to the status of cultural artefacts.

D2C1E7: Dahmer was one of the most celebrated prisoners in the western hemisphere.

Celebrated: Frames Dahmer's infamy as a form of dark recognition or notoriety.

Western hemisphere: Activates a frame of widespread impact, emphasizing his global recognition.

Overall these frames portray Dahmer as a figure of widespread fame and popularity extending it to global level,

D2C1E8: The line people in England have used is that Jeffrey Dahmer has made sure that Milwaukee's not just gonna be famous for beer.

Not just gonna be famous for beer: Frames Dahmer as a transformative figure who altered the city's identity.

Made sure: Activates a frame of deliberate influence, portraying him as a cultural landmark.

Overall these frames link Dahmer to Milwaukee's identity, emphasizing his long-lasting legacy. They also reinforce the cultural impact of Dahmer's crimes, intertwining his notoriety with the city's global reputation.

D2C1E9: He became a symbol of pain and senseless violence.

Symbol: Frames Dahmer as an emblematic figure, representing something larger than himself.

Pain and senseless violence: Activates frames of suffering and chaos, emphasizing the destructive impact of his crimes.

In general, it positions Dahmer as a representation of evil and tragedy, granting him a mythical and symbolic status in the public imagination. It also transforms Dahmer from an individual into a cultural and moral symbol, further solidifying his infamy.

4.3.2 Charm and Appeal

D2C2E1: He was very polite…cordial. I was somewhat surprised at how cordial Jeff was.

Polite and **cordial**: Activate frames of social niceties and respectful behavior, portraying Dahmer as approachable and well-mannered.

Surprised: Frames Dahmer's politeness as unexpected, reinforcing the contrast between his demeanor and his crimes.

It encourages viewers to momentarily disarm their judgment and consider Dahmer's affable and sociable qualities, creating curiosity. It also Softens Dahmer's image, juxtaposing his outward demeanor with the horror of his actions thus adding complexity to his character.

D2C2E2: Jeffrey told me he loved his grandmother very much. (third-party)

Loved his grandmother: Activates a family and care frame, highlighting Dahmer's capacity for emotional connection.

Very much: Amplifies the sincerity and depth of his feelings.

It humanizes Dahmer by showing his ability to form meaningful familial bonds, evoking sympathy for his affectionate side. It also contrasts Dahmer's crimes with his personal relationships, portraying him as a multidimensional individual.

D2C2E3: He was going to church. He was praying he would find some way to fight off these urges.

Going to church: Activates a religious and repentance frame, suggesting an effort to seek redemption.

Praying and **fight off urges**: Here a Frame of Dahmer's internal conflict and struggles is evoked, suggesting a battle between morality and evilness.

It invites empathy of the viewers by framing Dahmer as someone who tried to fight with his inner demons. This portrays him as more than a morally grey person, adding depth to Dahmer's character.

D2C2E4: Jeffrey was more reserved at talking about his childhood… it seemed very normal.

Reserved: Frames Dahmer as an introvert person, adding element of mystery to his character.

Very normal: Here a frame of normalcy is evoked which is creating a sharp contrast with his later actions.

In short, viewers are being encouraged to see Dahmer as mysterious figure, which deepens the fascination around him. Thus a complex layer is added to his character where his outward normal persona suggests a complexity to Dahmer's persona, where outward normalcy hides his darker reality.

D2C2E5: *I liked him because I felt that he had a soft heart.*

Soft heart: Frames Dahmer as kind and compassionate, evoking a gentle and vulnerable quality.

I liked him: The frame of trust and admiration is evoked, which shows his ability to make a positive impression on others.

Overall, it Positions Dahmer as a figure capable of eliciting genuine affection, complicating perceptions of his character. Reinforces the duality of Dahmer's persona, contrasting his likability with his criminal actions.

D2C2E6: *He looked so mild. He looked like a young Clark Kent.*

Mild: Frames Dahmer as harmless and non-threatening.

Clark Kent: Evokes a frame of innocence and boy-next-door charm, amplifying the conflict with his crimes.

Dahmer's appeal is enhanced by aligning him with a relatable, heroic cultural archetype Clark Kent (superman), creating intrigue around his hidden nature. The comparison is dangerously alarming because although both Clark Kent and Dahmer were hiding secrets behind their seemingly normal day to day personas. Clark was a superhero who was the only hope for earth while Dahmer was someone who appeared outwardly endearing while concealing monstrous tendencies.

D2C2E7: *He was subdued. He didn't look like a serial killer.*

Subdued: Frames Dahmer as calm and restrained, contributing to an impression of control.

Didn't look like a serial killer: Activates a frame of dissonance between appearance and behavior.

In short it fuels the fascination with Dahmer by contrasting expectations of violence with his composed demeanor. And portrays Dahmer as puzzling and deceptive, adding to his dark allure.

D2C2E8: *I was sitting there thinking, 'Wow. I'm in a room with a guy who's killed a lot of young men.*

Wow: Frames the moment as astonishing, reflecting a sense of awe.

Killed a lot of young men: Highlights the scale of Dahmer's crimes, adding to his notoriety.

It positions Dahmer as a figure of morbid fascination, evoking curiosity and unease. It also reflects society's obsession with notorious figures, emphasizing the intrigue Dahmer commands even among those who know his actions.

D2C2E9: *Dahmer was a good-looking man. (third-party)*

Good-looking: Frames Dahmer as physically appealing, contrasting with his actions to create a sense of dissonance.

It Highlights the unsettling allure of Dahmer's appearance, which complicates the perception of him as a predator. Adds to the narrative of Dahmer as an attractive yet dangerous figure, amplifying his paradoxical appeal.

D2C2E10: I felt like Clarice Starling in Silence of the Lambs. (third-party)

Clarice Starling: Activates a frame of intellectual engagement and intrigue, connecting Dahmer to a fictional genius-criminal archetype (Hannibal Lecter).

Silence of the Lambs: Frames Dahmer as someone whose actions and persona evoke deep fascination and complexity.

It Links Dahmer to a well-known cultural reference, elevating his crimes to a narrative of complexity and mystique. Positions Dahmer as a figure whose story invites deeper psychological analysis, evoking intellectual and emotional curiosity.

4.3.3 Sympathy and Identification

D2C3E1: He gave me a card, and he underlined the word 'friend. (third-party)

Underlined the word 'friend': Activates a frame of intentional emotional connection, emphasizing Dahmer's desire for meaningful relationships.

It humanizes Dahmer by showing his capacity for emotional gestures, hence inviting sympathy and identification. It also reinforces the narrative of Dahmer as a complex figure capable of both monstrous acts and human warmth

D2C3E2: It's just so bizarre, isn't it? It's not easy to talk about… like trying to pull up a two-ton stone out of a well. (subject-himself)

Bizarre: Frames Dahmer's actions and experiences as extraordinary and incomprehensible.

Two-ton stone out of a well: Activates a weight and struggle frame, suggesting an emotional or psychological burden.

In short, it positions Dahmer as someone with profound internal challenges, inviting sympathy for the difficulty of comprehending or addressing his actions. It also reflects the emotional and psychological weight of Dahmer's story, encouraging viewers to empathize with the complexities of his struggles.

D2C3E3: Jeff says, 'Leave my family out of it. My parents don't have any knowledge of my activities.

Leave my family out of it: Frames Dahmer as protective and loyal toward his

family.

No knowledge of my activities: Activates a frame of separation, emphasizing his effort to shield loved ones from blame.

Here it portrays Dahmer as someone capable of care and concern, contrasting with his monstrous actions. It also highlights Dahmer's humanity, suggesting he maintained moral boundaries concerning his family.

D2C3E4: He didn't want to submit to anybody. Jeffrey wanted to be completely in charge.

Didn't want to submit: Frames Dahmer as assertive and independent.

Completely in charge: Activates a control frame, emphasizing dominance and self-determination.

In general, it casts Dahmer as someone with recognizable human desires for control and autonomy, inviting identification with his motivations. Further, it explores Dahmer's psychological need for control, presenting him as a complex figure rather than a one-dimensional villain.

D2C3E5: I knew how horribly wrong it was, and I never wanted anything like that to ever happen again. (subject himself)

Horribly wrong: Activates a moral frame, acknowledging wrongdoing.

Never wanted… to happen again: Frames Dahmer as remorseful and introspective.

Hence, it humanizes Dahmer by positioning him as someone who is aware of his immoral actions and struggles with remorse. It offers a glimpse into Dahmer's conscience, encouraging viewers to see him as someone with moral awareness.

D2C3E6: He went a very long time where he didn't commit any murders.

Very long time: Frames Dahmer as someone capable of restraint.

Didn't commit any murders: Activates a frame of self-control and attempted rehabilitation.

Here it suggests that Dahmer may have struggled to suppress his urges, which elicits the viewer's empathy for his attempt to control himself. It also

highlights those moments where Dahmer attempted to avoid any wrongdoing, further complicating the audience's perception of him.

D2C3E7: There was a lot of conflict within him.

Conflict: Frames Dahmer as a person wrestling with internal struggles.

Within him: Activates an introspective frame, emphasizing his psychological complexity.

Here viewers are subtly encouraged to empathize with Dahmer's inner turmoil, framing him as a victim of his impulses. Moreover, it adds depth to Dahmer's character by portraying him as someone who is in a state of constant internal struggle.

D2C3E8: I think if I knew how to love, I would have loved him. (subject himself)

Knew how to love: Frames Dahmer as emotionally limited, suggesting a lack of understanding about human connection.

I would have loved him: Activates a frame of regret and longing for normalcy.

Here Dahmer is portrayed as someone yearning for emotional fulfillment, and desires for love.

D2C3E9: If I could just keep them longer without having to kill them. (subject himself)

Keep them longer: Frames Dahmer's actions as stemming from a desire for companionship.

Without having to kill them: Activates a moral conflict frame, showing regret and emotional need.

Here it portrays Dahmer as someone seeking connection but unable to achieve it without resorting to violence. It also offers insight into Dahmer's psyche, where his need for companionship collides with his violent compulsions.

D2C3E10: I take all the blame for what I did. I hurt many people. (subject himself)

Take all the blame: Frames Dahmer as accountable and remorseful.

Hurt many people: Activates a frame of regret and acknowledgment of harm done to other people.

Here it positions Dahmer as someone who recognizes the consequences of his actions, evoking a sense of humanity and moral awareness. It also portrays Dahmer as capable of feeling guilt and accepting accountability, further softening the perception of him as someone who is purely evil.

D2C3E11: I just couldn't believe it. I started sobbing and shaking.

Sobbing and shaking: Frames Dahmer's father's reaction as deeply emotional, emphasizing the collateral damage of Dahmer's actions.

It encourages viewers to empathize with the emotional toll taken by Dahmer's family. It also highlights the effect of Dahmer's actions on people closer to him.

4.3.4 Victim Dehumanization and Marginalization

D2C4E1: The bodies were piling up in his apartment.

Bodies": the victims are framed impersonally, and are reduced to physical remains only rather than individuals who have actual human identities.

Piling up: here a frame of logistics is evoked. The victims are portrayed as objects in a process.

Here it positions the victims as part of a gruesome scene, thus erasing their individuality and focusing on the grotesque scale of Dahmer's actions. It also focuses on the logistics and scale of the crime, hence marginalizing the humanity of the victims only to highlight Dahmer's depravity.

D2C4E2: I kept about 50 pounds. The rest went in the trash.

50 pounds: Frames the victims in terms of weight, objectifying their remains and stripping them of personhood.

The rest went in the trash: Activates a disposal frame, treating the victims as waste.

Here it portrays the victims as dehumanized materials for Dahmer's purposes, reducing their identities to measurements and waste. It also emphasizes Dahmer's chilling detachment, reinforcing the horror of his actions while marginalizing the victims' humanity.

D2C4E3: He was showering with two people in the bottom of the tub.

Two people: Uses vague terminology, avoiding direct reference to the victims as individuals.

In the bottom of the tub: Activates a spatial objectification frame, treating the victims as passive presences in Dahmer's routine.

Overall, it frames the victims as part of Dahmer's environment, dehumanizing them by focusing on their physical placement rather than their identities or lives. It reinforces the narrative of Dahmer's detachment and control, sidelining the victims' stories.

D2C4E4: Dahmer identified Steven's picture and was asked how he could be sure who it was. He told the police, 'You always remember your first.

Your first: Frames the victim as a milestone in Dahmer's timeline, stripping him of individuality.

Steven's picture: Offers only a fleeting reference to the victim's identity, emphasizing Dahmer's perspective instead.

Here it positions the victim as a reference point in Dahmer's narrative, marginalizing Steven's (one of Dahmer's victims) personal significance. It centers Dahmer's perspective, using the victim as a symbol of Dahmer's "beginning" while diminishing his personal story.

D2C4E5: He took lives for a few hours of sexual pleasure.

Took lives: Frames the victims as passive losses, abstracting the violence.

Few hours of sexual pleasure: Frames the victims solely in relation to Dahmer's gratification, ignoring their individuality.

It reduces the victims to instruments of Dahmer's desires, erasing their humanity to highlight his motivations. Thus it focuses on Dahmer's impulses, reinforcing the victims' marginalization by centering the narrative on his actions.

D2C2E6: *We were dismantling Dahmer's museum.*

Museum: Frames the victims as objects in a curated collection, likening them to exhibits rather than people.

Dismantling: Activates a deconstruction frame, focusing on the physical process rather than the emotional or personal loss.

Here the victims are treated as artifacts, emphasizing their objectification and dehumanization in Dahmer's world. It highlights the grotesque legacy of Dahmer's crimes, centering on the remains' symbolic and physical presence rather than the victims' lives.

4.3.5 Narrative Purpose

This narrative portrays Dahmer as an incomprehensible character as both a monster and a human. Themes like celebrity construction put emphasis on his cultural impact and fame. His charm and appeal, combines with remorse and internal struggles successfully create a complicated portrayal. However, this complexity sidelines the victims' stories. Their humanity is most of the times eliminated by giving details about Dahmer's actions and psychological nature.

The semantic and linguistic frames consistently elevate Dahmer to a figure of global infamy and fascination. Descriptions of his crimes as "unbelievable" and his actions as "extraordinary" further emphasize his uniqueness and dark legacy. This portrayal, blending shock, intrigue, and symbolic representation, aligns with the societal tendency to sensationalize notorious figures, framing Dahmer as both a cultural artefact and a grimly captivating character.

The semantic frames in these statements portray Dahmer as a complex figure, blending qualities of politeness, emotional connection, and physical appeal with his horrific actions. The juxtaposition of his likability and monstrousness enhances his unsettling allure, fueling both fascination and discomfort. These frames deepen the

persona of Dahmer as someone who could outwardly appear harmless while committing unimaginable crimes.

The semantic frames evoked in above statements systematically try to humanize Dahmer by describing his inner conflicts, emotional struggles, and moments where he shows remorse and guilt. These frames also invite the viewers to identify with these struggles and emotional vulnerabilities, even when his actions are extremely repulsive. The narrative character of Dahmer is complicated by showing him as someone who struggles with his impulsiveness and seeks emotional connection, which in turn invites empathy on part of the viewers.

The semantic frames in these statements consistently reduce the victims to physical objects, statistics, or elements of Dahmer's narrative. Words like "bodies," "pounds," and "museum" frame the victims as materials or evidence, stripping away their personal identities. These frames act as dehumanizing agent for the victims by focusing solely on either their presence in Dahmer's crimes or as the logistical consequence, while putting a continuous emphasis on Dahmer's detachment ability and control. This dehumanization pattern is generalized in true crime narratives where victims often become passives in serial killers' stories.

4.4 Semantic Frames in Conversations with a Serial Killer

The John Wayne Gacy Tapes delves into the horrifying crimes of John Wayne Gacy, a seemingly ordinary man who was secretly one of America's most prolific serial killers. Known as the "Killer Clown," Gacy lured young men to his home, where he tortured and murdered them, burying most of the bodies beneath his house. The documentary features archival audio recordings of Gacy's interviews, offering a disturbing look into his mind and his attempts to justify his actions. Through interviews with investigators, survivors, and victims' families, the series paints a haunting portrait of Gacy's double life and the devastating impact of his crimes on the community.

4.4.1 Celebrity Construction

D3C1E1: You know, everybody from the neighbour-hood, from the northwest suburbs of Chicago knew John Gacy.

Everybody: Here a universal recognition frame is activated which is suggesting that Gacy was a widely known figure.

Neighborhood: Here a community frame is activated, by portraying Gacy as a familiar figure.

Knew: Here, Gacy is framed as a person of local recognition.

This statement activates a frame of familiarity and local prominence, by positioning Gacy as a relatable, approachable community member. It also stablishes Gacy as a well-integrated member of his community, which constructs his dual image of public respectability versus private monstrosity.

D3C1E2: He was also a Democratic Precinct Captain… Precinct Captains take care of the people in the neighborhood.

Democratic Precinct Captain: Evokes a leadership and responsibility frame, highlighting his position of trust and influence.

Take care of: Triggers a caregiving and service-oriented frame, enhancing his image as someone who served the community.

It activates a perception of authority and altruism, making Gacy appear as a dependable leader, which contrasts starkly with his crimes. It further reinforces the juxtaposition of his respected public role with the hidden reality of his criminality, building his "celebrity" persona.

D3C1E3: Gacy was the best Precinct Captain in the Norwood Park Democratic Organization.

The best: Invokes a superlative frame, emphasizing exceptionalism and acclaim.

Norwood Park Democratic Organization: Frames Gacy within a structured, credible political institution.

Here it suggests admiration and validation from his peers, enhancing the cognitive frame of respectability and social competence. It also builds a foundation for Gacy's perceived importance and respect within his political and social community, enhancing his public allure.

D3C1E4: He had enough political clout. He did know some influential people.

Political clout: Evokes a power and influence frame, implying he could sway decisions or access resources.

Influential people: Frames Gacy as someone embedded in elite social and political networks.

Here it positions Gacy as a figure with connections and power, deepening the aura of his public persona. It also adds layers to his celebrity-like image by portraying him as not only known but strategically connected, amplifying his status.

D3C1E5: He was rubbing shoulders with the bigwigs, judges, aldermen.

Rubbing shoulders: Suggests familiarity and social ease with influential figures.

Bigwigs, judges, aldermen: Activates a hierarchy frame, associating Gacy with high-ranking individuals.

It strengthens the frame of social prominence, implying a level of legitimacy and respect that shielded him from suspicion. It also highlights how Gacy's social network contributed to his perceived respectability, crucial for understanding his dual persona.

D3C1E6: Gacy was the first serial killer in American history with this number of victims.

First serial killer: Invokes a historical precedence frame, placing Gacy in a unique category.

This number of victims: Frames him as exceptional in the context of crime, emphasizing magnitude.

On a broader level, it activates a frame of notoriety and infamy, presenting Gacy as a figure of morbid fascination. It establishes Gacy as an unparalleled figure in criminal history, further cementing his infamy as a form of celebrity.

D3C1E7: He's been in the spotlight since his arrest, with media everywhere.

In the spotlight: Triggers a performance or celebrity frame, suggesting public fascination.

Media everywhere: Activates a publicity frame, emphasizing attention and coverage.

Here it positions Gacy as a public spectacle, enhancing the allure of his infamy. Reflects society's obsession with notorious figures, framing Gacy as a media-created celebrity.

D3C1E8: I've enjoyed it. I like being the center of attraction. (subject himself)

Enjoyed it: Suggests self-satisfaction and self-awareness, evoking a frame of narcissism.

Center of attraction: Triggers a celebrity-like frame of attention-seeking and acknowledgment.

Gacy's own words reinforce his awareness of and engagement with his public image, positioning him as an active participant in his celebrity construction. Gacy's statement lays bare his complicity in and enjoyment of his notoriety, solidifying the narrative of his dark celebrity status.

4.4.2 Charm and Appeal

D3C2E1: He had a basement that was fixed up… a bar, a built-in bar, a nice pool table.

Fixed up: Evokes a frame of preparation and care, suggesting pride in appearances.

Bar and pool table: Activate frames of leisure, sociability, and entertainment, creating an inviting and fun atmosphere.

This activates a frame of normalcy and conviviality, portraying Gacy as someone who enjoys hosting and social engagement, making his home seem safe and approachable. It also suggests Gacy's outward charm and warmth, which contrasts with his hidden predatory nature.

D3C2E2: He seemed very personable, very friendly.

Personable: Frames him as approachable and likable.

Friendly: Evokes trustworthiness and warmth, essential traits for gaining others' confidence.

Here it a cultivates a trust frame, making Gacy appear as a socially skilled and relatable figure, which would enable him to easily disarm others. It also reinforces his public charm as a facade masking his sinister intentions

D3C2E3: People gravitated towards him. He was kind of the life of the party.

Gravitated: Evokes a magnetic frame, portraying him as naturally attractive to others.

Life of the party: Frames him as an energetic and engaging presence, a central figure in social interactions.

Here frames of admiration and attraction are activated, suggesting his ability to draw others in and dominate social spaces. Which highlights his charisma and ability to command attention, contributing to his overall deceptive allure.

D3C2E4: He invited us in, trying to show what a nice guy he was.

Invited: Frames him as hospitable and welcoming.

Nice guy: Activates a sincerity and trust frame, projecting genuine kindness.

Here it suggests an openness and goodwill about Gacy, disarming suspicion and making him appear trustworthy. This reflects his deliberate efforts to use charm as a tool for manipulation and control.

D3C2E5: He could do whatever he wanted… He had a lot of influence.

Do whatever he wanted: Here a frame of complete freedom and control is activated

Influence: Here Gacy is framed as a persuasive figure who is commanding in interpersonal relationships

This also suggests his command over social environments, further emphasizing his ability to turn situations in his favor. This highlights the clever use of his charm to garner control and power.

D3C2E6: He was very personable, the type of guy who made you feel comfortable.

Personable: Frames him as approachable and engaging.

Comfortable: Activates a safety and trust frame, emphasizing his ability to put people at ease.

This reinforces a perception of ease and reliability, making him seem non-threatening. It also builds on the narrative of Gacy's charm as a mechanism to mask his true nature.

D3C2E7: People liked him. He had a reputation for being helpful in the neighborhood.

Liked him: Evokes a frame of social acceptance and amiability.

Helpful: Frames him as community-oriented and altruistic.

Reputation: Adds a frame of consistent and established positive perception.

This positions him as a beloved member of the community, someone who is relied upon by others. This also suggests that his likeable personality helped him maintain his dual life undetected.

D3C2E8: Gacy would charm his way out of situations.

Charm his way out: Frames him as persuasive and cunning.

Situations: Implies adaptability and social intelligence in diverse contexts

This Activates a frame of strategic manipulation, where charisma is used as a deliberate tool. This reflects how Gacy's charm was integral to his ability to evade suspicion.

D3C2E9: He was a successful businessman, active in his community.

Successful businessman: Frames Gacy as a competent and accomplished figure.

Active in his community: Adds a frame of civic engagement and trustworthiness.

In general, it activates admiration and respect frames, positioning him as an upstanding figure. Which Reinforces his ability to project a respectable image that concealed his crimes.

4.4.3 Sympathy and Identification

D3C3E1: I had a wife. I had two children… I had wealth. Why did I go out and get myself involved with a kid? (subject himself)

I had: Repetition establishes a possession frame, emphasizing what he once valued and lost.

Wife, children, wealth: Activate frames of stability, success, and conventional

life.

Why did I go out and get myself involved: Evokes a frame of regret and self-reflection, showing internal conflict.

This positions Gacy as someone struggling with the consequences of his choices, activating a frame of vulnerability and moral ambiguity. This encourages identification in viewers by presenting him as a self-aware and remorseful person. This also portrays Gacy as a reflective and conflicted figure, opening a space for viewers to empathize with his humanity, despite his crimes.

D3C3E2: I could never please my father-in-law… My dad and I never really got along well. (subject himself)

Never please: Frames Gacy as perpetually striving for approval, highlighting a lack of fulfillment.

Never got along: Activates a conflict and alienation frame, showing strained familial relationships.

Overall, it invites viewers to see Gacy as someone who struggled for validation, activating a frame of emotional deprivation. It also humanizes Gacy by exposing his insecurities and need for acceptance, eliciting sympathy for his unmet emotional needs.

D3C3E3: I thought I was gonna get killed in there… I was scared to death. (subject himself)

Gonna get killed: Evokes a frame of danger and vulnerability.

Scared to death: Frames Gacy as deeply fearful, showing his human susceptibility.

This activates a frame of personal fear, encouraging viewers to momentarily identify with his vulnerability, regardless of his actions. This also frames Gacy as a person capable of fear and uncertainty, complicating the audience's perception of him as solely monstrous.

D3C3E4: They didn't tell me until after my dad was buried that he died. (subject himself)

Didn't tell me: Frames Gacy as excluded or overlooked, emphasizing isolation.

After my dad was buried: Activates a grief and regret frame, highlighting loss and unresolved emotions.

This encourages viewers to see Gacy as someone experiencing personal grief, activating empathy through shared human experiences of loss. It also depicts Gacy in a moment of emotional pain, offering a glimpse into his personal vulnerabilities and struggles.

D3C3E5: I was thinking of the kids, and I was thinking of Marlynn. (Gacy)

Thinking of the kids: Evokes a paternal and protective frame, focusing on family care.

This activates a family-oriented frame, allowing viewers to identify with Gacy's concern for loved ones. It also casts Gacy in a more human light by showing his concern for his family, creating a narrative of duality in his character.

D3C3E6: He wanted to be John Gacy, the married man, the family man.

Wanted to be: Frames a sense of aspiration and longing.

Married man, family man: Activates frames of conventional roles, emphasizing his desire for normalcy.

This invites viewers to sympathize with his longing for stability and conventional success, framing him as someone striving for normalcy. This portrays Gacy as a person who aspired to live a respectable life, enhancing identification with his struggles.

D3C3E7: He had a hard time fitting in… He was always the kid who would never quite fit in.

Hard time fitting in: Frames alienation and social struggle.

Kid who would never quite fit in: Activates an outsider frame, portraying lifelong marginalization.

This positions Gacy as an underdog, evoking sympathy by presenting him as someone perpetually on the margins of social acceptance. It also highlights his isolation and struggle, reinforcing a narrative that frames his actions as rooted in unresolved personal challenges.

4.4.4 Victim Dehumanization and Marginalization

D3C4E1: Six skeletal remains were discovered in the crawl space.

Skeletal remains: Frames the victims as anonymous physical remnants, emphasizing their condition rather than their humanity.

Discovered: Activates a frame of exploration or unearthing, evoking a detached, almost archaeological perspective.

Crawl space: Frames the location as a crime scene rather than a connection to individual lives.

Here the victims are reduced to dehumanized objects of curiosity, removing emotional ties and personal identities. This shifts focus away from the victims as individuals to the process of uncovering Gacy's crimes, reinforcing their marginalization.

D3C4E2: Gacy's choice for workers was always young men, small in stature.

Choice: Frames the victims as objects of selection, stripping them of agency.

Young men, small in stature: Activates physical characteristic frames, treating the victims as a type rather than unique individuals.

This frames the victims as interchangeable and functional, reducing them to qualities that served Gacy's purposes. Dehumanizes the victims by focusing on their utility to Gacy rather than their identities or lives.

D3C4E3: We're suspecting a bad outcome… but we didn't have any bodies.

Bad outcome: Abstracts the tragedy into a vague phrase, minimizing the emotional gravity.

Bodies: Frames the victims impersonally, focusing on their physical state rather than their humanity.

This suggests a clinical detachment, framing the victims as evidence rather than individuals. It also diminishes the personal loss by framing the victims as part of an investigative process.

D3C4E4: We're in a basement full of kids here.

Full of kids: Frames the victims collectively, erasing individual identities.

Basement: Emphasizes the physical location, detaching the narrative from the victims' humanity.

This creates a sense of mass victimhood without acknowledging individuality, reinforcing their marginalization. It also highlights the scale of the crime while abstracting the victims into a collective reference.

D3C4E5: There's three bodies stacked at that point.

Three bodies: Frames the victims as a countable quantity, reducing them to numbers.

Stacked: Activates a storage or object frame, further dehumanizing the victims.

Overall, the victims presented are abstract entities, devoid of their individuality. Which shifts the focus to the grotesque logistics of Gacy's crimes, sidelining the victims' personal narratives.

D3C4E6: They excavated the crawl space for more remains.

Excavated: Frames the process in clinical, archaeological terms, likening the victims to artifacts.

Remains: Abstracts the victims into physical remnants, detaching from their humanity.

Here the victims are presented as part of a procedural process, reducing their identities to objects of investigation. It shifts focus to the act of discovery rather than the individuals, further dehumanizing the victims.

D3C4E7: The remains were tagged and cataloged, like an archaeological dig.

Tagged and cataloged: Activates an organizational frame, treating the victims like evidence.

Archaeological dig: Likens the process to scientific discovery, abstracting from the tragedy.

This reduces the victims to some impersonal artefacts and dehumanizes them by using procedural language. This highlights the important aspects of crime scene which further marginalize the identities of the victims.

4.4.5 Narrative Purpose

This particular docuseries has constructed a scary narrative by placing side by side Gacy's public charm and evilness. Themes of celebrity construction and charm have worked to increase his allure. Gacy is presented as an individual who liked and enjoyed being center of attention and he achieved this in a lot of ways, one being a serial killer. Since the discovery of his crimes he remained in media spotlight. His first ranking in terms of the number of lives he took also seems to bring him the desired attention. This documentary discusses the role he played in society as a helpful head and also the local fame he enjoyed in the neighbor-hood.

Gacy's charm is evident in his sociable personality. He is described as a person having a magnetic personality who made everyone around him comfortable. He had important social contacts mainly political ones which often helped him to find way outs. He is talked about as he was liked a lot by the people due to his friendly, persuasive and helpful personality.

Viewers of the documentary are made to sympathize with Gacy as his personal losses, griefs and childhood struggles are discussed mostly through his own words. As public finds him regretful and reflective upon his evil actions. Common public is also invited to identify with his struggles for validation and approval and

him being unable to mingle with other kids in childhood, all of which are attempts to elicit sympathy for the killer. This focus has come at the cost of the victims' marginalization and dehumanization throughout the narrative.

As the charms and humanization attempts are on their way, it is noted that victims are discussed as some sort of scientific discovery. Their bodies are talked about in abstract and generalized forms, often as part of crime scenes or collection of evidences. And at certain times they are discussed from the killer's perspective of why he chose them as his victims. By reducing victims to just numbers and physical descriptions, or remains, this documentary has built a hierarchy over victims' stories. The imbalance caused, as a result, contributes to a new trend in true crime narratives where killer often get all the focus and sidelines the humanity of their victims.

4.5 Semantic Frames in Night Stalker: A Hunt for a Serial Killer

Night Stalker: The Hunt for a Serial Killer chronicles the terrifying reign of Richard Ramirez, the "Night Stalker," who terrorized California in the mid-1980s. The documentary captures the fear and chaos that gripped the state as Ramirez committed a series of brutal home invasions, sexual assaults, and murders. Through interviews with detectives, survivors, and journalists, the series details the intense manhunt that eventually led to Ramirez's capture. The documentary also explores Ramirez's dark fascination with Satanism and the media's role in amplifying his notoriety, offering a gripping and unsettling account of one of the most infamous crime sprees in American history.

4.5.1 Celebrity Construction

D4C1E1: LA was a facade. From one side, it was glamorous celebrities. But if you went around to the other side… LA could be a very dark place.

Facade: here a frame of duality and deception is activated which proposes a hidden side to Los Angeles' usual glamorous image

Dark place: It frames the city as ominous, where Ramirez's actions align with its dangerous side.

This positions Ramirez as part of a larger narrative of LA's contrast between glamour and danger, elevating him to a symbolic figure of the city's darker side. It

also links Ramirez's crimes to the cultural narrative of Los Angeles, blending his notoriety with the city's mystique.

D4C1E2: In a city as big as LA, nobody knows where this individual may strike next.

Big as LA: Frames the city as vast and chaotic, heightening the sense of the killer's elusiveness.

Strike next: Activates a frame of unpredictability and danger, portraying Ramirez as a threat present everywhere.

This enhances Ramirez's aura of mystery and power, positioning him as an almost legendary figure within the city. It also reinforces suspense with Ramirez's unpredictability, contributing to his dark celebrity.

D4C1E3: The Herald Examiner called him 'The Night Stalker.' And that was the branding that stuck.

Called him 'The Night Stalker': Frames the killer as an entity with a defined and memorable identity.

Branding that stuck: Activates a frame of marketing and recognition, treating his identity as a product of media sensationalism.

Here Ramirez's notoriety is linked to the power of media, which transformed him into a cultural phenomenon. It also highlights how the media played an important role in crafting Ramirez's infamy, solidifying his name in public consciousness.

D4C1E4: He's spread like a disease, an epidemic… 500 miles away and doing the same thing.

Spread like a disease: Frames Ramirez as an unstoppable, infectious force, amplifying his perceived omnipresence.

Epidemic: Activates a public health frame, portraying him as a widespread and uncontrollable phenomenon.

This type of framing enhances Ramirez's presence as an unstoppable and pervasive threat, likening his actions to a natural disaster or plague. It also elevates Ramirez's crimes to the scale of a crisis, reinforcing his dark celebrity as a figure of fear and fascination.

D4C1E5: He liked that name.

Liked that name: Frames Ramirez as self-aware and complicit in embracing his notoriety.

That name: Refers to the title "Night Stalker," emphasizing its significance in shaping his identity.

This positions Ramirez as a figure who consciously took advantage of his infamy. It also suggests that Ramirez's self-awareness increased his dark allure.

D4C1E6: We're happy to announce that the individual we have in custody is Richard Ramirez, the Night Stalker.

Happy to announce: Frames the capture as a moment of public and official relief, emphasizing its significance.

The Night Stalker: Reaffirms Ramirez's identity within his infamous brand.

This Positions Ramirez's capture as a significant event in a public narrative, which elevates him to a central figure in a societal story. It also highlights the ending of the Night Stalker's notoriety by framing the announcement as a definitive moment in his legacy.

4.5.2 Charm and Appeal

D4C2E1: He stood right there and picked up the hat… he looked at it… turned around and looked at me, and kind of smiled a little bit.

Smiled a little bit: Activates a frame of playfulness and disarming charm.

Picked up the hat: Frames Ramirez's actions as deliberate, almost casual, highlighting his confidence.

This portrays Ramirez as someone who can project a false sense of normalcy and engagement, contributing to his disturbing allure. It also creates an unsettling

tension between his calm behavior and his violent persona, amplifying his enigmatic appeal.

D4C2E2: *He put the gun down by his side and doesn't even run. He walks away.*

Doesn't even run: Frames Ramirez as calm and deliberate, highlighting his confidence.

Walks away: Activates a frame of composure and control.

This enhances Ramirez's image as someone who operates on his own terms, which evokes fascination through his unhurried demeanor. It also portrays Ramirez as fearless and calculated, which reinforced his unsettling appeal.

D4C2E3: *Like, a moment, stop. And he turns and he just… He's looking at m*e.

Looking at me: Frames Ramirez as deliberate in creating an intimate and unsettling moment.

Stop: Activates a frame of intentional engagement, drawing attention to his awareness of his presence.

This positions Ramirez as someone who uses his gaze and composure to dominate and unsettle those around him, which adds to his magnetism. It reinforces his ability to control and captivate through seemingly minor gestures, which deepens his enigmatic charm.

D4C2E4: *He had put his foot on the clock… taking his time.*

Taking his time: Frames Ramirez as casual and unhurried, projecting confidence and control.

Foot on the clock: Activates a frame of dominance and disregard for urgency.

These frames highlight his audacity and lack of fear. This enhances his dark allure by portraying him as completely in control. It also establishes Ramirez as a figure whose casualness is as chilling as his crimes, reinforcing his unnerving appeal.

D4C2E5: *The killer would leave things like a signature. He wanted people to know.*

Signature: Frames his actions as deliberate and performative, adding an artistic or calculated element to his crimes.

Wanted people to know: Activates a frame of self-awareness and a desire for recognition.

This, here, portrays Ramirez as someone who took pride in his crimes, making them part of a personal narrative. It also reinforces his awareness of his fame, aligning his actions with a good sense of identity.

D4C2E6: He got comfortable after killing someone, even taking the time to have a snack.

Got comfortable: Frames Ramirez as unnervingly casual in the aftermath of violence.

Snack: Activates a frame of routine and normalcy, contrasting sharply with his actions.

This positions Ramirez as someone disturbingly detached from his crimes, amplifying his chilling confidence. It further emphasizes his audacity and lack of remorse, contributing to his unsettling appeal.

D4C2E7: He's doing this in residential neighbourhoods and no one knows where he'll strike next.

Residential neighborhoods: Frames Ramirez's crimes as invasive and close to home, heightening fear.

No one knows: Activates a frame of unpredictability, making him appear elusive and omnipresent.

This portrays Ramirez as a figure who thrives on unpredictability, adding to his dangerous allure. It also reinforces the suspense and mystique surrounding Ramirez's movements, making him more compelling.

D4C2E8: He's reading the paper and cutting the phone lines… Shows he's following the case, staying a step ahead.

Staying a step ahead: Frames Ramirez as cunning and strategic, emphasizing his intelligence.

Reading the paper: Activates a frame of self-awareness, showing his engagement with his narrative.

This positions Ramirez as someone highly calculated, which adds a layer of fascination to his character. It also highlights his intelligence and composure, amplifying his unsettling charisma.

D4C2E9: He would go into people's homes and move around like he owned the place.

Move around like he owned the place: Frames Ramirez as bold and audacious, emphasizing his confidence.

Here, it positions Ramirez as a figure of complete control, whose lack of fear adds to his dark appeal. It reinforces the sense of Ramirez's dominance and audacity, making his actions both terrifying and captivating.

D4C2E10: He could remain calm, cold… almost like he was playing a game with law enforcement.

Calm, cold: Frames Ramirez as composed and detached, emphasizing his self-control.

Playing a game: Activates a frame of strategic engagement, likening his actions to calculated moves.

This positions Ramirez as a figure of unnerving composure and intelligence, adding to his dangerous charm. It highlights Ramirez's calculated nature, portraying him as a figure who thrived on control and suspense.

4.5.3 Sympathy and Identification

D4C3E1: There was a familiarity… he reminded me of a family member.

Familiarity: evokes a frame of recognition and familiarity.

Family member: Frames Ramirez as a relatable family member, evoking emotional connection and familial relation.

This invites viewers to see Ramirez in a different light as someone who could exists as both a criminal and a relatable figure. It also evokes a sense of relatability

and emotional closeness, further complicating the audience's perception of him solely.

D4C3E2: There's a deviancy that says, 'I like to see a frightened look on your face.'

Deviancy: Here Ramirez's actions are framed psychologically abnormal, shifting focus to his mental state.

Frightened look on your face: A frame of emotional outcome and control is evoked, showing his deep desire for control.

This explores Ramirez's psychological motivations and offers a lens of understanding for readers rather than strong disapproval. It also builds curiosity into Ramirez's mind, about his actions thus creating a link to understand why he did what he did.

D4C3E3: He had this very weak side where he didn't want anyone to see him.

Weak side: frames Ramirez as a vulnerable person, humanizing his character.

Didn't want anyone to see him: A frame of insecurity and self-protection is activated.

This informs us that Ramirez also struggled with his vulnerable side, causing viewers to identify with him as they are also able to recognize their own insecurities. It humanizes Ramirez' persona with complex emotional layers behind his crimes.

D4C3E4: When he told the victim to swear to Satan, he didn't want to be looked at.

Didn't want to be looked at: Frames Ramirez as uncomfortable with direct confrontation, implying his vulnerable side.

Swear to Satan: Activates a frame of ritual and psychological control, reflecting his complex inner world.

This highlights a contradiction between Ramirez's outward dominance and inward discomfort, encouraging sympathy for his inner struggles. This also suggests

that Ramirez had layers of shame or insecurity, complicating his image as purely monstrous.

D4C3E5: Richard was a thief since he was a kid… He had a lot of bad influences.

Since he was a kid: Frames Ramirez as shaped by his early life, emphasizing innocence and malleability.

Bad influences: Activates a frame of external responsibility, shifting partial blame away from Ramirez.

This positions Ramirez as a product of his environment, inviting sympathy by emphasizing the factors that shaped his behavior. This casts Ramirez as a victim of his circumstances, fostering a narrative of conditional empathy.

D4C3E6: The cousin that killed the wife in front of him… telling him horror stories about things they'd done while in the Army in Vietnam.

Killed the wife in front of him: Frames Ramirez as a witness to traumatic violence, emphasizing his exposure to brutality.

Horror stories: Activates a frame of psychological scarring, showing how these stories shaped his worldview.

This suggests Ramirez's actions were influenced by early exposure to extreme violence, inviting identification with the impact of trauma. This also provides context for Ramirez's psychological development, framing him as a victim of a toxic and violent environment.

D4C3E7: Practically all of the things that could poison a child were part of his life.

Poison a child: Frames Ramirez's upbringing as inherently harmful, emphasizing its impact on his development.

All of the things: Activates a frame of overwhelming adversity, portraying Ramirez as a product of pervasive dysfunction.

This positions Ramirez as someone who is shaped by unavoidable negative influences, creating a narrative of environmental determinism. This also casts

Ramirez as a victim of circumstance, inviting empathy for the challenges he faced in his early life.

4.5.4 Victim Dehumanization and Marginalization

D4C4E1: The male is executed as he's sleeping on the couch… with a gunshot wound to the temple.

The male: Frames the victim impersonally, reducing him to his gender.

Executed: Activates a frame of precision and detachment, focusing on the act rather than the person.

Gunshot wound to the temple: Frames the victim through the method of violence rather than his identity or life.

This focuses on the clinical details of the murder, marginalizing the victim's humanity and individuality. It also shifts attention to the killer's method, relegating the victim to a passive object in the narrative.

D4C4E2: She had several stab wounds just above the vagina.

Several stab wounds: Frames the victim through the physical violence inflicted

on her.

Above the vagina: Activates a graphic, objectifying frame, focusing on the anatomy rather than the individual.

These frames reduce the victim to a body subjected to violence, erasing her identity. This also emphasizes the brutality of the crime while sidelining the victim's humanity and life story.

D4C4E3: We had a serial killer that was responsible for kidnapping children, raping adult women, killing adult women, killing males.

Kidnapping children, raping adult women, killing males: Groups victims into categories, abstracting them into roles rather than individuals.

Serial killer responsible: Frames the crimes as part of a list, emphasizing the killer's scope rather than the victims' lives.

These frames depersonalize the victims, treating them as collective rather than unique individuals. It also focuses on the killer's range of crimes, marginalizing the victims' experiences and identities.

D4C4E4: Tsai-Lian Yu was left sprawled in the street, shot in the chest.

Sprawled in the street: Frames the victim as part of a crime scene, reducing her to a visual image.

Shot in the chest: Activates a frame of clinical violence, focusing on the injury rather than the person.

This depicts the victim through her physical state and location, erasing her individuality and life story. It also highlights the crime scene over the victim's humanity.

D4C4E5: The killer had assaulted and murdered the elderly women with an electrical cord.

The elderly women: Groups the victims by age, abstracting their identities.

With an electrical cord: Frames the crime through its method, focusing on the killer's actions rather than the victims' lives.

These frames work to marginalize the victims by emphasizing the brutality of the method over their personal experiences. They also center the narrative on the killer's violence, sidelining the victims' individuality.

D4C4E6: Mr. Pan was found in bed, still lying in a pool of blood.

Found in bed: Frames the victim as part of a crime scene.

Pool of blood: Activates a frame of gore, emphasizing the aftermath over the victim's life.

This treats the victim as part of the crime's visual impact, reducing his individuality. It also highlights the gruesome scene, overshadowing the victim's humanity.

D4C4E7: Victims sprawled across the room, signs of a struggle everywhere.

Victims sprawled: Frames the victims as elements of the scene, focusing on their physical positions.

Signs of a struggle: Activates a frame of chaos and violence, abstracting the victims into components of the narrative.

These frames depersonalize the victims, emphasizing the spectacle of the crime over their identities. These also center the crime's dramatic visual elements, marginalizing the personal loss of the victims.

4.5.5 Narrative Purpose

This documentary has constructed Ramirez as a conflicting figure, mixing elements of fear, fascination, and humanization. Themes like celebrity construction and charm bring to the front his cultural impact and unsettling charm. And moments where viewers are invited to sympathize and identify with him, go into detail in exploring his vulnerable sides and also into the factors that mold his actions. However, this detailed exploration into his complexity was only possible if victims are sidelined and marginalized throughout the story.

The documentary portrays Richard Ramirez as a dark iconic figure whose identity was shaped by both his crimes and the media's branding. The label "Night Stalker" becomes central to his story, amplified by his elusiveness, unpredictability, and self- awareness. By linking Ramirez to the cultural narrative of Los Angeles as a city of contrasts, the documentary blends his infamy with the city's identity, further cementing his place as a symbol of danger and fascination.

Richard Ramirez's charm and appeal are framed through his confidence, composure, and audacity. The documentary presents him as disturbingly calm and deliberate, with moments of calculated charisma and unsettling engagement. These frames create a chilling portrait of a man who was both terrifying and captivating, blending his monstrous actions with an unnerving sense of control and self-awareness.

The documentary frames Ramirez as a complex figure whose actions were deeply influenced by his upbringing, exposure to violence, and psychological struggles. These before-mentioned semantic frames highlight his vulnerabilities, such

as his insecurities and shame, while contextualizing his behavior within a narrative of trauma and adverse influences. These elements humanize Ramirez, inviting viewers to explore the factors that shaped him and to momentarily identify with his struggles, even as his actions remain condemnable.

The documentary consistently uses clinical, categorical, and scene-focused language to describe Ramirez's victims, reducing them to roles, injuries, or elements of a crime scene. Semantic frames like "sprawled," "stab wounds," and "found in a pool of blood" emphasize the spectacle and violence of the crimes while sidelining the victims' individuality and humanity. This approach highlights Ramirez's brutality but marginalizes the personal stories and losses of his victims, treating them as secondary to the narrative of his infamy.

With the main focus on the serial killer, this documentary sensationalizes the wider and broader societal trends where killers are sensationalized and victims; stories are sidelined.

4.6 Semantic Frames in Sons of Sam: A Descent of Darkness

The Sons of Sam: A Descent into Darkness is a gripping docuseries that revisits the infamous case of David Berkowitz, the "Son of Sam," who terrorized New York City in the 1970s. While Berkowitz confessed to the murders, the series delves into the controversial theory that he may not have acted alone. Investigative journalist Maury Terry spent decades uncovering evidence suggesting a larger conspiracy involving a satanic cult. Through archival footage, interviews, and Terry's relentless pursuit of the truth, the series raises unsettling questions about the case, challenging the official narrative and leaving viewers to ponder the possibility of a darker, more complex story behind the killings.

4.6.1 Celebrity Construction

D5C1E1: Son of Sam, over the past few weeks, has gotten more print space and broadcast time in New York than anything since Elizabeth Taylor married Richard Burton.

More print space and broadcast time: Frames Berkowitz as a media sensation, paralleling his coverage to that of cultural icons.

Elizabeth Taylor married Richard Burton: Activates a frame of high-profile celebrity events, elevating Berkowitz to a similar level of public interest.

This positions Berkowitz as a figure of huge public fascination, blending his infamy with celebrity status. It also highlights the media's role in creating a spectacle around Berkowitz, framing him as both a criminal and a cultural phenomenon.

D5C1E2: Berkowitz was brought to court in an eight-vehicle motorcade.

Eight-vehicle motorcade: Frames Berkowitz's transport as grand and ceremonial, resembling treatment for dignitaries or high-profile individuals.

Brought to court: Activates a judicial frame, but the grandeur contrasts sharply with typical criminal proceedings.

This reinforces Berkowitz's status as an extraordinary figure, amplifying his infamy through the dramatic security measures. It also adds to the Berkowitz's public importance, framing him as a criminal whose spectacle is worth-watching.

D5C1E3: He was surrounded by dozens of detectives and uniformed police.

Dozens of detectives and uniformed police: Frames Berkowitz as a figure who requires extraordinary protection.

This positions Berkowitz as someone whose presence requires massive attention and resources, reinforcing his high-profile status. It also portrays Berkowitz as a figure of exceptional significance, undermining his perceived danger and infamy.

D5C1E4: Jim Mitteager now had access to the most famous criminal in America.

Most famous criminal in America: Frames Berkowitz as a singular figure of infamy with national recognition.

Had access to: Activates a frame of exclusivity, portraying Berkowitz as a much sought-after figure.

This strengthens Berkowitz's celebrity status, portraying him as an exclusive figure even within his infamy. It also highlights Berkowitz's central role in the public imagination as cultural and criminal legend.

D5C1E5: It made big headlines. 'Santucci reopens the Son of Sam case.'

Big headlines: Frames the case as a major media event, emphasizing its cultural impact.

Reopens the Son of Sam case: Activates a frame of renewed public interest, keeping Berkowitz in the spotlight.

This positions Berkowitz and his case as a long-lasting source of curiosity and mystery, reinforcing his status as a figure of lasting notoriety. It also frames the reopening of the case as a proof of its cultural and historical significance, further solidifying Berkowitz's infamy.

D5C1E6: This was the Golden Fleece. He got an interview with a guy who never spoke to anyone, and everyone wanted.

Golden Fleece: (a Greek mythological reference) Frames Berkowitz as an elusive and sought-after figure, drawing on mythological comparisons.

Everyone wanted: Activates a frame of high demand, portraying Berkowitz as an exclusive and desirable subject.

This also reinforces Berkowitz's allure as rare and extraordinary, elevating his infamy to the level of a prized achievement. It also highlights the media's role in amplifying Berkowitz's celebrity status, treating him as a figure in huge demand.

D5C1E7: For Maury, it was a huge deal... Maury was Holmes and Berkowitz was his Moriarty.

Holmes and Moriarty: Frames Berkowitz as a legendary adversary, aligning him with iconic literary villains.

Huge deal: Activates a frame of significance, emphasizing the importance of the relationship.

This elevates Berkowitz to the status of a legendary figure, reinforcing his cultural and narrative significance. It casts Berkowitz as a larger-than-life figure whose infamy transcends the criminal realm into the symbolic and legendary.

D5C1E8: The Son of Sam conspiracy theory lives, with new help from David Berkowitz himself.

Conspiracy theory lives: Frames Berkowitz as a long-lasting figure of intrigue and mystery.

New help from David Berkowitz: Activates a frame of active participation, suggesting his continued relevance and influence.

This positions Berkowitz as a central figure in an ongoing narrative, sustaining public fascination with his story. It also emphasizes Berkowitz's role in continuing his own legend, reinforcing his position as a cultural figure.

D5C1E9: A killer called Son of Sam... He terrorized New York City. He taunted the police and the media.

Terrorized New York City: Frames Berkowitz as a city-wide menace, emphasizing the scale of his impact.

Taunted the police and the media: Activates a frame of defiance and theatricality, highlighting his performative nature.

This Casts Berkowitz as a notorious and mysterious figure, reinforcing his dark celebrity. It also portrays Berkowitz as both a criminal and a character, whose calculated actions amplified his infamy.

4.6.2 Charm and Appeal

D5C2E1: He was polite. He was well-spoken.

Polite: Frames Berkowitz as courteous and socially refined, contrasting with the expected image of a criminal.

Well-spoken: Activates a frame of articulate communication, suggesting intelligence and control.

This positions Berkowitz as unexpectedly graceful, creating dissonance between his demeanor and his crimes, which heightens his intrigue. Shifts the focus from Berkowitz's violence to his social abilities, adding layers to his persona.

D5C2E2: In court, Berkowitz broke into a slight smile, just as he had the day he was arrested.

Slight smile: Berkowitz's expressions are framed as puzzling, suggesting confidence or self-awareness.

Just as he had the day he was arrested: Here a frame of consistency is activated, which emphasized his calm and composed behavior.

This highlights Berkowitz's unnerving self-control, which adds to his dark appeal. It also creates his image as someone who is unaffected by any kind of circumstances, thus amplifying his mystique.

D5C2E2: People wanted to know more about him, as if he were some sort of intriguing puzzle.

Intriguing puzzle: Berkowitz is framed as a complex and fascinating figure.

People wanted to know more: A frame of public fascination and engagement is activated.

Here Berkovitz is framed as a figure whose complex persona has an appeal and it poses challenges in understanding his character. This also reinforces Berkowitz's narrative as an enigmatic and captivating one.

D5C2E3: Berkowitz seemed oddly cooperative, even offering extra details.

Oddly cooperative: Berkowitz's behavior is framed as an unexpected and accessible one, which contrasts with his crimes.

Offering extra details: A frame of openness is evoked here by portraying him as remarkably transparent.

This suggests Berkowitz's willingness to engage in investigative process, making him appear more personable and less guarded. It also adds a layer of unexpected relatability to Berkowitz's character, contributing to his strange allure.

D5C2E4: He seemed to have this aura of calmness during the entire process.

Aura of calmness: Frames Berkowitz as composed and self-assured, even in high-stress situations.

During the entire process: Activates a frame of consistency, emphasizing his composure.

This portrays Berkowitz's composure as a key aspect of his ambigous personality, inviting fascination. It also positions Berkowitz as someone whose calm demeanor adds depth to his narrative, making him appear in control and charismatic.

D5C2E5: We were all expecting a raving maniac… But really… I never just could get a grip of things.

Expecting a raving maniac: Frames Berkowitz as defying stereotypes about criminals.

Couldn't get a grip of things: Activates a frame of perplexity, emphasizing his surprising normalcy.

This highlights Berkowitz's unexpected relatability, creating a disconnection between his demeanor and his crimes, which adds to his appeal. It also reinforces the audience's curiosity by portraying him as someone who challenges preconceived notions.

D5C2E6: Berkowitz's own words kept people riveted, as if he were telling a captivating story.

Riveted: Frames Berkowitz as a compelling storyteller, capable of holding attention.

Captivating story: Activates a narrative frame, portraying Berkowitz as an engaging and charismatic speaker.

This positions Berkowitz as someone who could draw people in with his words, enhancing his allure. It also portrays his ability to control the narrative and captivate audiences, emphasizing his dark charisma.

D5C2E7: He had a way of answering questions that just drew people in.

Drew people in: Frames Berkowitz as magnetic and engaging in his communication style.

Way of answering questions: Activates a frame of calculated charm, highlighting his conversational skills.

This suggests Berkowitz's conversational abilities were a key element of his appeal, making him relatable and charismatic. This reinforces the idea of him as an individual who could captivate those around him, even in the face of his crimes.

4.6.3 Sympathy and Identification

D5C3E1: Berkowitz grew up in a troubled household.

Troubled household: frames a difficult and unstable upbringing of Berkovitz, emphasizing the influence of external factors.

The viewers are encouraged to acknowledge the role of external factors on Berkowitz's criminal actions. This not only elicits empathy for him but also positions him as a product of his environment, which proposes that his outcomes may have been shaped by his troubled background.

D5C3E2: He had recently discovered he was adopted, and when he sought out his birth mother, she rejected him.

Adopted: A frame of uncertain identity is evoked, emphasizing emotional toll on Berkovitz.

Rejected: Here a frame of abandonment and rejection is activated.

This highlights the emotions which are caused by rejection and loss of preconceived identity, thus positioning Berkowitz as someone who is deeply hurt by the actions of his closed ones. It also encourages viewers to have sympathy for his struggles to belong and to be accepted by his mother.

D5C3E3: Berkowitz said, 'I didn't hate them. I wasn't angry. They were just people.'

Didn't hate them" and **"wasn't angry**: Berkowitz's actions are framed as detached, and no personal hostility is involved.

Just people: Here a frame of emotional neutrality is evoked, again emphasizing Berkovitz' psychological distance.

This offers a view into Berkowitz's mind, and inviting viewers to understand his motives without excusing his actions. It also presents Berkowitz's detached emotions as a way to explore his psyche.

D5C3E4: He was an auxiliary policeman and later served in the military, struggling to find purpose.

Struggling to find purpose: Berkowitz's life is being framed as his search to find meaning, emphasizing his life struggles.

Auxiliary policeman and **military**: Here frames of contribution and effort for society are evoked, which are contrasting with Berkovitz' later crimes.

These frames present Berkowitz as someone who is struggling to find direction, making his falling into the criminal world way more tragic than it really is. It also attempts to humanize Berkowitz by portraying him as a person who was seeking peace and purpose in life.

D5C3E5: I felt a unique fascination with the Son of Sam case… wondering why he did what he did.

Unique fascination: Berkowitz is framed here as a subject of curiosity and interest.

Wondering why: Here a frame of inquiry into psychological exploration is evoked.

This reflects an attempt at empathizing with Berkowitz's motives, thus framing him as someone whose actions were based on some reason and cause. It also Invites viewers to delve into the reasons responsible for Berkowitz's actions which helps to develop a sense of curiosity and interest.

D5C3E6: He was vulnerable to bad influences.

Vulnerable: A frame of vulnerability is evoked here, which actively reduces Berkovitz' agency.

Bad influences: Here again a frame of external factors in the form of a bad influence from outside, is evoked, shifting the blame away from Berkovitz.

This again depicts Berkowitz as someone who was led astray, again inviting sympathy for him due to external influence. This also shifts the blame away partly to the external influences, which fosters empathy for the criminal.

D5C3E7: *Berkowitz described feeling lost and disconnected.*

Lost and **disconnected**: Here frames of emotional struggle and indifference are activated.

This emphasizes Berkowitz's internal disturbances, forcing viewers with the same feelings to identify with him. It also humanizes Berkowitz by portraying him as someone who is struggling with universal emotions, thus inviting identification.

D5C3E8: *I was always a very tormented person. (subject himself)*

Tormented: Here a frame of internal suffering is activated, which emphasizes psychological pain.

Always: Activates a frame of eternal struggle, portraying long-standing pains and struggles.

This depicts Berkowitz as someone who is troubled by his own mind, hence inviting sympathy for his battles. It also positions Berkowitz as a tragic character, developing an understanding of his struggles.

D5C3E9: *I had many emotional problems and was always in trouble. (subject himself)*

Emotional problems: Here Berkowitz is framed as a person who is affected by mental health challenges.

Always in trouble: Here a frame of constant struggle and inflexibility to adapt is activated.

This highlights Berkowitz's as someone who face difficulties in steering life, thus presenting him as an overwhelmed and vulnerable figure. It also encourages sympathy from viewers by presenting Berkowitz's actions as partially arising from his unsolved emotional issues.

D5C3E10: He was manipulated, drawn in by the allure of something he didn't fully understand.

Manipulated: Here Berkowitz is being framed again as a victim of external forces, masking his autonomy.

Didn't fully understand: Here a frame of naiveness is activated by portraying Berkovitz as someone who was lacking in many aspects.

This centers Berkowitz as vulnerable persons who is lacking awareness, thus eliciting empathy for his naivety. It also portrays Berkowitz as someone who received a bad influence and was misled, thus complicating the narrative of his criminality.

4.6.4 Victim Dehumanization and Marginalization

D5C4E1: The police believed he targeted random people.

Random people: The victims are framed as nameless and replaceable, removing both their individuality and humanity.

This suggests that victims were mere objects of opportunity and devalues their personal stories and valued lives. It also emphasizes the killer's narrative and his random crimes, marginalizing the victims' humanity and personal identities.

D5C4E2: A series of eight attacks.

Series: The crimes are framed as part of a sequence, as some repetitive pattern.

Eight attacks: A numerical frame is evoked here, reducing the victims to a number in a broader sense.

This masks the victims' lives to accommodate into a broader narrative of criminal events. It also marginalizes their personal significance by prioritizing criminal events over individual victim stories.

D5C2E3: The police just wanted to solve it, no matter who the victims were.

Just wanted to solve it: The investigation is framed as task-oriented.

No matter who the victims were: A frame of indifference is activated, which devalues the victims' identities and value.

By portraying victims as secondary to the narrative, their stories are sidelined by prioritizing investigation success rather than acknowledging of the victims' humanity.

4.6.5 Narrative Purpose

This documentary has portrayed Berkowitz as a dual figure: his actions making him a monster but his struggles suggesting he is a human. Themes like celebrity construction and charm build his cultural impact and unsettling charismatic persona. Moments of sympathy and identification reveal his vulnerable side and personal battles.

The documentary frames David Berkowitz as a criminal whose infamy reached the level of celebrity, driven by both media sensationalism and his own theatricality. Descriptions of his media coverage, comparisons to literary villains, and grand security measures amplify his image as an extraordinary figure. By focusing on his enduring relevance through conspiracy theories and cultural references, the narrative positions Berkowitz as a symbol of both fear and fascination, elevating his crimes to legendary status.

This documentary presents David Berkowitz as a paradoxical figure whose calm demeanor, articulate speech, and unexpected social grace stand in stark contrast to his violent actions. Semantic frames used here emphasize his composure, charisma, and ability to engage and fascinate others. His enigmatic nature adds to his appeal, making him a figure of both fear and fascination.

This documentary has constructed David Berkowitz as a complicated figure influences by a troubled past, complex emotional struggles, and bad external influences. Semantic frames like "troubled household," "rejected," and "lost and disconnected" strengthen his vulnerable side and loneliness, thus inviting viewers take in consideration the factors that might have caused his actions. Also the highlighting of his inner struggles, being prone to bad influence, and search for his identity develops empathy for him as a human being with intense struggles.

The said documentary has also sidelined victims' stories and limited them to just numerical frames and the crimes committed against them into sequences. Also, marginalization of victims is carried out by talking about them in an indifferent tone, referring them as 'random people'. They are discussed from the killers' point of view to understand their selection as victims.

By putting the focus on Berkowitz's story, the documentary upholds the broader societal tendencies to sensationalize killers and sidelining the receivers of their actions.

4.7 Comparative Analysis Across All 5 Documentaries

Fuhs (2018) observes that non-fiction films are often regarded as having a privileged relationship to the truth due to their claims of authenticity and presumed indexical relationship. However, many documentary filmmakers recognize that truth is not always paramount. Instead, they often prioritize entertainment value and the need to convey either their own argument or that of their subject (Austin, 2006).

The above statements accurately enclose the purpose of taking documentaries as sample data for this research. Their perceived nature as authentic descriptions of subject matter at hand is never questioned, hence what they claim to portray is considered factual by the general public, which is not true specially in this case where they are given voice and their personal voices are added into the documentaries to make viewers identify with their struggles and personal stories.

The comparative narrative analysis focuses on how each documentary has presented the portrayal of each serial killer. This comparative analysis is summarized under four subheadings for each documentary; Creation of charismatic figures, Highlighting Media appeal of each serial killer, Exploring the 'Human' side of each killer and marginalization of victims.

Media's role in bringing fame to each killer by portraying them either as a fascinating or romanticized figure or a symbol of fear is discussed. Prominent aspects of serial killers' lives, and the degree to which the killer's personal narratives are central to the documentaries, are also brought into the comparative analysis. Moreover, the characteristics or events that are used to make the serial killers'

portrayals prominent, and the distinct ways in which each killer's legacy is shaped, are discussed.

4.7.1 Highlighting Media Appeal and Celebrity Construction

All the 5 documentaries have highlighted the respective serial killers' media appeal in their time zones and presented them as they were kind of some celebrity people specifically Ted Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmer and David Berkovitz.

The concept of celebrification, as defined by Driesness (2012) and Jerslev (2014), involves transforming ordinary people or public figures into celebrities through media exposure. Film media facilitates the stardom of serial killers through its significant reach and profitability (Schmid 2005).

Such serial killers are referred to as celebrity monsters by Bonn (2014). The celebrification of these serial killers was already present in their time zone, however highlighting these celebrity images in the current times with attempts to keep them alive in the popular culture and is not ok. Netflix should avoid giving a voice to the inhuman serial killers. The implications of these portrayals are not ideal, as Ramsland states that young girls start idolizing these criminals, thinking they can change them into better humans.

Throughout these documentaries, it is evident that their media coverage is highlighted repeatedly and how Berkowitz was brought in surrounded by detectives and officers in an eight-vehicle motorcade, how media from 50 states and 9 foreign countries were covering Bundy's trial, citing Dahmer's story as the biggest, never-seen case in city's history. Their widespread recognition is also discussed like some privilege. Their widespread fame is emphasized by describing them as "1st serial killer with this number of victims (Gacy), Milwaukee Cannibal (Dahmer), Night Stalker (Ramirez), Sons of Sam (Berkovitz). Mentioning how they liked getting all the attention and used this as leverage to tell their stories to the world is also discussed.

Various historical, mythical and literary allusion are made to further solidify their celebrity status. For instance, Ted Bundy is compared to the Jack Ripper, an infamous historical figure who brutally killed numerous victims. He is also termed a

Legend of his time zone because of what he did. Both media and public fascination with his trial is highlighted at multiple places. His actions were significantly downplayed by his mysterious aura.

Similarly, David Berkovitz was also compared to cultural icons and their fames. He was also given mythological references such as "Golden Fleece". And also called as the infamous adversary of Sherlock Holmes. These references turn him into a celebrity who is worthy of being in news headlines.

Then we have Jeffrey Dahmer whose painful and senseless violence is presented as transformative and memorable for the history of Milwaukee city. His crimes termed as historical and his victims remains as a museum, as if he is some sort of a scientific discoverer. He is also said to have changed the symbol for the city's fame from beer to a disturbing serial killer who became a symbol for pain and senseless violence.

Assuming Richard Ramirez liked the nickname 'Night Stalker' which he received from the media, is also an example of how media coverage attempts to sensationalize these killers. Including Gacy's comment on how he liked being at the center of media coverage seems unnecessary to the claims of documentaries being produced for educational and awareness purposes.

Genzoe (2021) discusses how the true crime genre shares its heritage with journalism but is driven by different impulses. These impulses may refer to the commercial and entertainment purpose of such productions. The more the entertainment value, the more its commercial value would be accomplished. And that is achieved by inciting public fascination, which according to Schmid (2005) is achieved by converging violence and stardom through widespread presence of serial killer narratives. Bonn (2014) also discusses the facilitation of 'celebrity monsters' trend by entertainment media by activating the deep seated curiosity to understand minds and motives of serial killers. Hence these are the ground, film media actively plays on to achieve their commercial goals.

4.7.2 Portraying as Charismatic Figures

All 5 serial killers are presented as charming figures, though with different individual respective charms. Ted Bundy's handsome, boyish charm is highlighted a

lot throughout the documentary, adding to his trustable and friendly look. He is called, polite, calm, handsome, giving boy next door vibes. How he was able to strike up conversations with anyone. His incredible confidence and charming looks gave him a lot of loyal followers during his trial.

Similarly, John Gacy's charm is presented as his ability to gain the trust of people around him. He was said to be the life of parties where he made influential acquaintances. His competitive and persuasive dealings and his hospitable and helping nature earned him the trust of his community members.

Then, there comes the charm of Jeffrey Dahmer. Dahmer's charm is highlighted by his introverted, reserved and seemingly harmless nature. Throughout the documentary, he is presented as a person who is trustable, cordial and polite, morally aware of his actions and their consequences. He is portrayed as feeling guilty for what he did. He is also mentioned as a person who loved family specially his grandmother. A comment of his neighbor is included who called him soft hearted and reason for liking him. He was also called good looking and young Clark Kent (the timid and shy version of superman) and how he didn't look like a serial killer.

Berkowitz' is presented as a polite and well-spoken figure who knew his way with words and kept the public engaged in his story. His slight smiles, politeness, cooperation and way of answering things are said to have complemented his aura of calmness.

Richard's charm is in his bold, deviant and audacious nature by which he committed his crimes casually and daringly, not fearful of anyone. How he left his signatures after killing his victims and ate snacks comfortably taking his time. He was shown to be one step ahead of the law officials. His demeanor is mentioned in a dramatic way, creating a mysterious aura.

Although each of the serial killers had individual charms highlighted in the documentary, the emphasis on outward charm of Ted Bundy was the most controversial. In the relative documentary, again and again we hear the praises of his good looking, handsome face and how he manipulated and lured his victims due to his clean boy looks. Mary Gonzalez has examined the harmful effects of portraying

handsome men as serial killers on young girls and Ramsland has examined that young girls idolize such type of serial killers due to their charismatic and handsome personalities and start to think that love can change them. This is highly problematic as these killers are psychopaths, devoid of any emotions. Her comment on the hyper-fixation of charm over brutality can also be extended to the other four versions of serial killers presented in these documentaries, and not just Bundy which downplays their heinous crimes. These portrayals are controversial in nature, creating a contrast between the appealing and disturbing nature of these criminals, causing public confusion on how to digest these portrayals. Prior (2005) suggests that media has a persuasive power that is directly proportional to its consumption. And according to Gerbner and Gross' (1976) cultivation theory, exposure to television or film media shapes and distorts public perception, which seems kind of true in this case as Fludzinsky (2024) conducted a pre and post-test study on research participants and found out that after viewing short pieces of serial killer documentaries and getting to know their personal lives, viewer perceptions considerably changed from dislike to empathy.

4.7.3 Exploration of 'Human' sides

Smith (1995) identified three structures of sympathy which are recognition, alignment and allegiance. According to Rodbjerg (2015) recognition happens with the identification of serial killer such as with the production of these documentaries, public has identified the serial killers, their name titles etc. The next stage is alignment which includes active spectators who start to know and feel the character. as these documentaries revolve around serial killers as their main and only subjects, viewers gradually come across their personal life details, their personalities and childhood and they start to feel for them. The final step is allegiance which involves evaluation of values and moral codes of serial killers by spectators. This step may create sympathy if serial killers are presented in normalized, humanized and victimized way. Smith (2011) further talks about two types of allegiance, one of which is partial allegiance and this type of allegiance happens when serial killers are presented having a humanistic, sensitive and vulnerable side to them.

These documentaries delved deeper to explore their human sides. This not only causes viewers to feel for them but also to identify with their struggles and pain. Viewers not only feel but also identify with Berkovitz and Ramirez' troubled childhood and the bad influences; Bundy, Gacy and Dahmer's loneliness and desire for companionships. Their need to find purpose in life and their emotional struggles and sufferings make viewers want to empathize with them. Such attempts are made throughout these documentary series with the purpose of humanizing these serial killers. As Richard Ramirez, aka Night Stalker was exposed to physical abuse from the childhood, Dahmer was seeking permanent connections, John Gacy was struggling for validation and so on. Jenkins (1994) talks about slasher movies which featured serial killers who usually experienced a traumatic incident in their formative years that triggered a psychological transformation into a killer. The narrative style of the documentary: Night Stalker; The Hunt for a Serial Killer is same with slasher type movies because the communicated reason, why Richard became serial killer is claimed by the documentary to be the exposition to the physical abuse by one of his cousins, who used to tell Richard the brutal stories of war, and who killer her wife in front of Richard when he was just a child. Apparently these incidents turned Ramirez into the audacious and ruthless killer.

Cettl (2002) states that serial killer portrayals have changed from presenting them as deformed monsters to people, seemingly normal and with human characteristics. He also states that serial killers' portrayal started to present them as seemingly normal people with a sympathetic backstory to evoke empathy from the readers.

The said documentaries have also glorified and humanized the serial killers' portrayals by giving them voices in the form of including their personal narratives as we see Dahmer compares the burden of killing people and talking about it to the feeling of taking a two-ton stone out of the wall, how John Gacy was feeling regret on destroying his seemingly perfect family life, how he and Bundy both describe their feeling of fear being in jail, and Berkovitz confessing that he is a tormented person. All these instances of their personal narrative being included in the documentaries help not only get inside their minds but also creates humanized

feelings for them. Even if these narratives are an attempt to feed the public curiosity or to understand what made them do these actions, almost none of these killers, except Berkovitz and Dahmer confessed to the killings, and even if they did, they talked in extremely vague terms. Lucas (2019) criticizes Ted Bundy Tapes and says that Berlinger let Bundy manipulate from his grave for almost two hours. Das and Cecil (2022) also criticizes the showing of personal life details and family-oriented behavior of these killers which sidelines the victims and highlights criminals.

4.7.4 Marginalization of Victims

In all the five docuseries, it is observed victims are reduced to random people and numbers. They are often limited to gender references, categorical groupings, as evidences, as discarded objects and as part of crime scenes. They are given minimum representation and that too in a dehumanizing way. Their individual and personal identities are erased, focusing on the violence inflicted on them. According to Das and Cecil (2022), Gore Visualization dehumanizes victims. Such type of visualization was found in all of the five documentaries specially in Ted Bundy Tapes, Dahmer Tapes and Night Stalker story. Discussing and showing how victims were mutilated by teeth, how they were struck and lying in pools of their own blood not only dehumanizes the victims but also creates desenstivization and normalization of violence. Schmid (2005) states that 'wound culture' normalizes killers and their action.

Zeitchik (2019) also explores that Netflix might justify their content by claiming it aligns with viewer demands, research indicates that increasing on-screen violence can lead to greater real-life tolerance of such behavior. Strutz also criticizes such portrayals for the transformation of these life-destroying events into entertainment is gravely concerning. While some media respectfully acknowledge victims and their families, many others insensitively highlight the perpetrators as seen in the case with the sample Netflix documentaries. Victim marginalization is the height of insensitiveness which needs to be avoided.

Copycat crimes also occur due to such gruesome and sensationalized portrayals. As Surette (2013) explored the relationship between real-world crime models and copycat crime and found that 22% of inmates had committed a copycat

crime, 20% were violent, and 19% perceived the media as a helpful source of information on how to commit a crime.

Krammer (2023) has criticized the unethical approach taken by film media which commercializes on victims' sufferings as seen in Netflix documentaries where the claim of honoring victims was negated by victims' families who were neither informed nor asked for permission about making documentaries. They were forced to relive the sufferings of their loved ones. He also questions the vague social and cultural motives of making these documentaries as claims of quests for educational and psychological understanding of criminal minds are getting bogus now. And these topics don't have any novelty in them so why make such stories which serve no purpose other than entertainment for public, commercialization for the film industry and sufferings for victims' families. As Browder (2010) calls true crime a 'dystopian variant' where the depiction of insoluble issue take place and rather than discussing some social condition, tapping on individual psyche is preferred, which serves almost no purpose.

4.8 Conclusion

In conclusion, the comparative analysis of the five selected documentaries revealed consistent narrative patterns that construct serial killers as figures of fascination rather than solely as disturbing and cruel criminals. Across all the documentaries, strategies such as celebrification, emphasis on personal charms, selective use of language to elicit sympathy for them while simultaneously marginalizing the voices of victims. These recurring frames, when examined alongside existing literature and theoretical perspectives, highlight how true crime media continues to reproduce narratives that romanticize killers, glorify them and humanize their existence

By critically engaging with these portrayals, this chapter has demonstrated how each documentary not only reflects but also reinforces broader societal discourses surrounding crime and celebrity. These insights provide a foundation for identifying the key findings of the study. The following and final chapter will

therefore synthesize these analytical observations into a set of main findings, present their implications, and offer recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Overview

This study aimed to explore the potential romanticization in the portrayal of serial killers in true crime documentaries. To delve deeper into these portrayals, the study performed a thorough linguistic analysis by taking a Semantic Frame analytical approach to look into how linguistic units created specific semantic frames which evoked a broader message of romanticization by glorifying and humanizing serial killers.

Narrative framing in each documentary also reinforced the presence of romanticized construction of the criminal image. A comparative analysis of all the documentaries brought forward the evident patterns and themes about the glorification and humanization of serial killers. The deconstruction of romanticization brought about by the development of coding categories, based on theoretical assumptions about romanticization, proved to be a guiding light in bringing out the disturbing descriptions.

The analysis of all the documentaries revealed the complex interaction of linguistic frames and narrative techniques in shaping the representation of serial killers. This study explored in detail how these documentaries contribute to shaping these killers' identities and potentially romanticizing them. The findings provide perceptions about how these documentaries raise serial killers into some sort of cultural figures, while marginalizing the victims and their stories.

The purpose of this study was to deconstruct the romanticization attempts by decoding the language used in true crime documentaries, which was significant due to the impact such portrayals have on the general public. It was also important to address it as such portrayals push victims back into the dark while giving serial killers the ultimate limelight. These controversial portrayals make viewers sympathize and identify with the serial killers rather than the victims.

Previous studies on this topic mainly focused on the stylistic and quantitative analyses. The qualitative analyses were less elaborate, comprised of small sample data and missed out on the linguistic point of view, hence the need to carry out this study to fill the research gap.

5.2 Findings

This sections includes how this study has attempted to answer the research questions posed in this research. The first research question is as follows;

- What role does the interactions of linguistic frames and narrative techniques play in shaping the overall representation of serial killers?

The semantic frame analysis helped to unveil serial killers' portrayals in true crime documentaries through linguistic frames and the employed narrative techniques. All the categories discussing serial killers' constructed images provide fruitful insights about the particular way these criminals have been portrayed in Netflix documentaries. The interaction of linguistic frames and narrative techniques that were explored under each category is discussed one by one in detail.

Ted Bundy's Portrayal

The representation of Ted Bundy in the documentary is strongly mediated through linguistic frames and narrative techniques that elevate his status, emphasize his charm, and invite sympathy. First, Bundy is placed within a celebrity frame, marked by lexical choices such as "international interest," "somebody very special," and "a legend in his own time zone." The intertextual reference to Jack the Ripper reinforces this historical comparison frame, situating Bundy alongside iconic cultural figures of infamy. This framing is amplified by the narrative technique of trial coverage as spectacle, where the "unprecedented filming trial" itself becomes part of his media mythology, drawing public fascination.

Second, Bundy's charm and appeal frame emerges through descriptors like "handsome," "boy-next-door type," and "smooth-talking." Here, the lexical emphasis on ordinariness and politeness contrasts sharply with his crimes, while the metaphorical phrasing "his eyes went black" injects suspense and narrative intrigue. Such framing is supported by characterization techniques (juxtaposing external

normalcy with internal darkness) and interview testimony framing, where external voices validate his charisma and acceptance in society.

Finally, Bundy is humanized through a sympathy/identification frame, achieved by including his mother's perspective ("best son in the world," "normal and active boy"), his backstory of paternal absence ("father-unknown"), and his own prison statements ("sick and tired of being locked up"). These combine testimonial narrative techniques (using family accounts), backstory insertion (childhood trauma), and direct self-narration (first-person prison reflections), which invite viewers to see him not only as a killer but also as a vulnerable human seeking love and relief.

Jeffrey Dahmer's Portrayal

The documentary employs a mix of linguistic frames and narrative techniques to construct Dahmer's identity as both notorious and strangely relatable. The celebrity frame is evident in descriptors such as "country spellbound," "biggest story," and "case ever seen in the history of Milwaukee," which elevate his crimes to an event of national fascination. A metaphorical frame is introduced with the comparison of police work to the "dismantling of a museum," suggesting spectacle and meticulous curiosity. Furthermore, the shift in Milwaukee's fame from "beer" to "ruthless and violent murders" positions Dahmer as a defining cultural figure. This is underscored by his labelling as a "symbol of pain and senseless violence." Yet, unlike typical portrayals of criminals, he is framed through contrastive discourse as someone who "lacked defensiveness," making him an anomaly among offenders.

The charm and appeal frame is built around lexical choices like "cordial," "polite," and "soft-hearted," as well as his physical description as "mild" and "good-looking." The analogy to "Clark Kent" places Dahmer within a familiar cultural archetype, reinforcing his deceptive normalcy. His religiosity "praying to resist urges" functions as a narrative technique of moral struggle, humanizing his character despite the monstrosity of his acts.

A sympathy/identification frame is created through personal confessions and metaphoric analogies. Dahmer's expressed desire for companionship ("keep his friends longer") and regretful tone ("how horribly wrong I was") are highlighted by direct self-narration, a narrative strategy that foregrounds his own voice. His

justifications, such as wanting to keep victims without killing them, introduce moral ambiguity, while his analogy of removing a "2-ton stone out of a well" dramatizes his inner struggle, using metaphor as a technique of emotional intensification.

John Wayne Gacy's Portrayal

The documentary frames John Wayne Gacy through a blend of notoriety and community respect. His celebrity frame is articulated by statements such as "1st serial killer in American history" with such a victim count, and his constant media presence after arrest ("been in spotlight," "enjoyed it"). His local prominence is reinforced by descriptors like "well-known in suburbs" and "the best precinct captain," which embed him within a frame of civic respectability. The narrative technique of highlighting political connections ("rubbing shoulders with bigwigs, judges, and aldermen") emphasizes his unusual social reach, further situating him as a public figure of influence.

His charm and appeal frame is constructed around his skills and community integration. Lexical units such as "fixed up basement," "built-in nice pool table," and "successful businessman" portray him as industrious and resourceful. Descriptions of him as "personable," "friendly," and able to "make you comfortable" support this frame, while narrative testimony from others ("people gravitated towards him") confirms his perceived likability. His influence, expressed in phrases like "do whatever he wanted," also reflects a narrative of power that helped sustain his charismatic public image.

The sympathy/identification frame is built on Gacy's own self-narration of regret and unmet emotional needs. His lament "why did I go out and get involved with a kid" is a direct confessional technique that positions him as remorseful. Backstory elements, such as his troubled relationship with his father and failure to satisfy paternal expectations, serve as explanatory frames that invite empathy. Emotional vulnerability is heightened by prison accounts of being "scared to death" and yearning for family life, demonstrate the narrative choices that foreground his fragility rather than only his violence.

Richard Ramirez's Portrayal

The construction of Richard Ramirez in the documentary diverges from the celebrification seen with Bundy, Dahmer, and Gacy, positioning him instead as an

emblem of urban dread. His notoriety is linguistically framed through metaphors such as "dark side of glamorous Los Angeles" and "an epidemic," both of which anchor his crimes as citywide afflictions rather than individual events. The narrative technique of media branding is central here: the moniker "The Night Stalker" transforms Ramirez into a symbolic figure, echoing the media's power to mythologize criminality. Unlike the celebrificatory spotlight of trials and political ties, Ramirez's fame is constructed as ominous, inseparable from the city's cultural fabric.

His charm and appeal frame differs significantly, emphasizing dark allure rather than conventional likability. Descriptions such as "calm deviancy," "signature," and "gets comfortable after killing" construct him as chillingly composed, while actional details like "puts foot on clock" or "doesn't even run and walks away" narratively stage his crimes with cinematic suspense. These narrative techniques of ritualization and dramatization give his violence an unsettling mystique. Additionally, his cunning is foregrounded through linguistic emphasis on strategic behaviors ("reads paper, cuts phone line, remains one step ahead"), while his boldness is dramatized in the phrase "moves around in his victims' homes as if he owns the place."

Sympathy and identification frames emerge through the documentary's insertion of childhood trauma. Phrases like "childhood full of poisoning things," exposure to a cousin's violent stories, and witnessing a murder in youth function as backstory techniques to contextualize his later brutality. The detail that Ramirez asked victims not to look at him humanizes his vulnerability, implying a discomfort with exposure even amid his acts of violence. This use of testimonial framing and backstory insertion positions him as a product of harmful environments, inviting a degree of empathic interpretation.

David Berkowitz

The documentary's construction of David Berkowitz revives and amplifies his media-driven celebrity status. His fame is narrated through direct comparisons with popular culture: "more print space and broadcast time than the extravagant marriage of two famous actors," and his court appearance staged with "an eight-vehicle motorcade" and "dozens of detectives and police," echoing the spectacle reserved for

dignitaries or celebrities. Intertextual references like the "Golden Fleece" and "Holmes and Berkowitz, his Moriarty" not only elevate his cultural resonance but also situate him in a mythic and literary frame. The phrase "the Son of Sam terrorized New York City" emphasizes both notoriety and symbolic reach, while "taunted police and media" reinforces his role as an antagonist in a public drama. These narrative techniques of spectacle, mythic comparison, and media branding situate Berkowitz as a figure of enduring fascination.

His charm and appeal frame lies in his unexpectedly calm and polite demeanor. Descriptions such as "polite," "well-spoken," and "aura of calmness" challenge public expectation of a "ravaging maniac." Narrative testimony highlights his courtroom composure ("broke into a smile"), while his conversational ability ("his way of answering things," "as if telling a captivating story") is presented as a narrative technique of self-representation. The paradox between his monstrous crimes and ordinary demeanor fuels his intrigue, transforming him into an "intriguing puzzle" for both public and media.

Sympathy and identification are elicited through the documentary's backstory insertion and direct self-narration. References to his "troubled childhood," discovery of being adopted, and rejection by his birth mother frame his emotional instability as rooted in personal history. Additional details of serving as "auxiliary policeman" and "in the army" reinforce his normalcy, contrasting with his crimes. His own words "a very tormented person," with "many emotional problems" are used as self-narrative techniques to humanize him, while the claim of being "manipulated by something he didn't fully understand" provides a frame of diminished agency.

Cross-Case Synthesis

Across the five cases, the interaction of linguistic frames and narrative techniques consistently works to shape the representation of serial killers in complex, layered ways. While each killer is constructed with unique emphases, three broad patterns emerge: celebrity status, personal charms or appeal, and the creation of sympathy or identification.

Firstly, all five killers are framed through linguistic markers of celebrity and media fascination. Bundy is described as being in the "spotlight" and "constantly

covered by media," Dahmer's case is called the "biggest story" that "changed Milwaukee's trajectory of fame," Gacy is said to have "enjoyed" being in the spotlight and was portrayed as rubbing shoulders with "bigwigs and judges," Ramirez's notoriety is encapsulated through his media-given label "The Night Stalker," and Berkowitz is said to have received "more print space" than celebrity weddings. Narrative techniques such as comparison (Bundy's fame likened to celebrity culture), amplification (Dahmer's case compared to dismantling a museum), and symbolic labeling (Ramirez branded "The Night Stalker") elevate these figures into cultural icons. Thus, the killers are not merely presented as criminals but as media-saturated figures whose cases take on the qualities of public spectacle.

Secondly, the documentaries foreground charms and personal appeals, which complicate the killers' images. Bundy is framed as "handsome," "articulate," and "eloquent," Dahmer is depicted as "cordial," "reserved," and even compared to "Clark Kent," Gacy is presented as "personable and friendly" with the ability to "make you comfortable," Ramirez is shown to have a "creepy, dark allure" through his calm and ritualistic behaviors, and Berkowitz is framed as "polite," "well-spoken," and even "captivating" in the way he told his story. These linguistic descriptors are paired with narrative techniques of juxtaposition, setting their charm against the brutality of their actions, which produces a paradoxical tension in their representations.

Finally, all five killers are offered varying degrees of humanization and sympathy. Bundy's "troubled childhood," Dahmer's regret and analogies of guilt (like removing a "2-ton stone"), Gacy's yearning to be a "family man" and his troubled paternal relationships, Ramirez's traumatic childhood filled with "poisoning things," and Berkowitz's feelings of rejection after discovering his adoption all function to frame them as vulnerable, emotionally complex individuals. Narrative techniques of backstory, confession, and analogy are crucial here, as they give viewers access to the killers' internal worlds and struggles. These techniques invite not only understanding but also, at times, reluctant empathy.

Moving towards second research question which is stated as below:

- How does this representation contribute to the potential romanticization of these criminals in the selected documentaries?

The interaction of linguistic frames and narrative techniques used in these documentaries contributes to the potential romanticization of serial killers by elevating the killers into figures of fascination while simultaneously minimizing the visibility and humanity of their victims. This imbalance allows viewers to focus on the killers' celebrity status, personal charm, and emotional vulnerabilities, often at the expense of remembering the brutality and human cost of their crimes.

Across the cases, celebrification frames construct the killers as figures worthy of media spectacle. Bundy is called "a legend in his own time zone," Dahmer's case is labeled the "biggest story in Milwaukee's history," Gacy is portrayed as "well-known in the suburbs" and politically connected, Ramirez is branded with the media title "The Night Stalker," and Berkowitz is said to have received "more print space" than high-profile celebrity weddings. These descriptors, paired with narrative techniques such as comparison (e.g., Bundy to Jack the Ripper), symbolic labeling (Ramirez's moniker), and amplification (Berkowitz's motorcade, Dahmer's "museum"), elevate these killers into icons of notoriety. This celeb-like framing creates the conditions for romanticization by transforming real criminals into larger-than-life personas who dominate cultural memory.

Equally significant is the emphasis on charms and appeal. Bundy is presented as "handsome" and "smooth-talking," Dahmer as "cordial" and "soft-hearted," Gacy as "personable and friendly," Ramirez as exuding a "creepy, dark allure," and Berkowitz as "well-spoken" and "captivating." These linguistic units, combined with narrative juxtapositions against the violence of their crimes, allow audiences to perceive the killers not only as brutal but also as paradoxically fascinating, even likable, figures. Such framing risks producing what Schmid (2005) terms the "criminal-celebrity paradox," in which charm and monstrosity co-exist, inviting an aesthetic rather than moral engagement with the subject.

Further deepening this fascination is the documentaries' use of humanization and sympathy frames. Bundy's complicated parentage and longing "to be loved," Dahmer's expressed guilt framed through the analogy of a "2-ton stone," Gacy's

yearning for paternal approval, Ramirez's traumatic exposure to violence in childhood, and Berkowitz's rejection by his birth mother all work through narrative strategies of confession, backstory, and analogy. These strategies pull viewers into the killers' psychological and emotional worlds, encouraging identification. When killers are repeatedly shown as vulnerable and troubled, it risks reframing them as tragic or misunderstood figures rather than solely as perpetrators of extreme violence.

In stark contrast, victims are consistently marginalized through linguistic and narrative treatment. Their suffering is often reduced to forensic descriptors: Bundy's victims are "skeletal remains in the mountains," Dahmer's are "bodies piling up" or "50 pounds kept as remains," Gacy's are "skeletal remains tagged and catalogued," Ramirez's are "sprawled in pools of blood," and Berkowitz's victims are "random people." The passive voice in these descriptions "bodies dumped," "remains found," "victims sprawled" removes the killers' agency and erases victims' individuality, transforming them into statistics, objects, or background details. Meanwhile, the killers are granted full narrative voice, backstories, and interior perspectives. This asymmetry fosters the conditions for romanticization because it prioritizes the killer's story while silencing the humanity of those harmed.

Taken together, the documentaries' representational strategies, elevating killers into media icons, foregrounding their paradoxical charm, humanizing their vulnerabilities, and simultaneously marginalizing victims, contribute to the potential romanticization of these criminals. The audience is drawn into admiring the killers' charisma, sympathizing with their struggles, or engaging with their fame, often at the cost of remembering their crimes as acts of violence against real people. In effect, these representational choices reframe serial killers from being solely objects of condemnation into figures of fascination, enabling the cultural process of romanticization.

In short, the documentaries do not overtly glorify the crimes or explicitly present the killers as heroic figures. However, by amplifying the killers' celebrity status, foregrounding their charms and emotional struggles, and simultaneously reducing victims to nameless bodies, skeletal remains, or random statistics, they create a representational imbalance. This imbalance shifts narrative attention away

from the brutality of the acts and onto the killers' personalities and stories, thereby setting the stage for their potential romanticization. In this way, the documentaries frame serial killers less as perpetrators of violence and more as complex, fascinating cultural figures whose memory persists in public imagination.

Key Findings

- Killers are framed as figures of cultural spectacle (e.g., Bundy as a "legend," Dahmer's case as the "biggest story," Ramirez branded "The Night Stalker," Berkowitz receiving "more print space than celebrities").

- Narrative techniques such as comparison, amplification, and symbolic labeling elevate them beyond criminals into icons of public fascination.

- Linguistic frames present killers as personable, attractive, or captivating (Bundy as "handsome" and "smooth-talking," Dahmer as "cordial" and "Clark Kent-like," Gacy as "friendly," Berkowitz as "well-spoken," Ramirez with a "dark allure").

- Juxtaposition of charm against brutality creates a paradoxical tension that fuels fascination.

- Backstories highlight troubled childhoods, parental issues, or emotional struggles (Bundy's illegitimacy, Dahmer's guilt, Gacy's paternal trauma, Ramirez's poisoned childhood, Berkowitz's rejection by his birth mother).

- Narrative strategies of confession, backstory, and analogy invite identification with the killers' vulnerabilities.

- Victims are framed through dehumanizing or forensic language ("skeletal remains," "sprawled in pools of blood," "random people," "catalogued like an archaeological dig").

- Frequent use of passive voice ("bodies dumped," "remains found") erases killers' agency and sidelines victims' identities.

- The imbalance between killers' rich, multi-layered portrayals and victims' reduction to background details shifts attention toward the killers.

- This does not directly glorify their crimes but sets the stage for potential romanticization, as audiences may admire their charisma, sympathize with their

struggles, and remember them as cultural figures rather than solely as perpetrators of violence.

5.3 Conclusion

The findings show how language frames and narrative techniques combine to present serial killers as people who are feared, adored, and are culturally fascinating. By highlighting their unique traits and stories, the documentaries, often at the expense of the victims, turn these individuals into icons of societal fascination. Ted Bundy's charisma, Richard Ramirez's resistance and carefree attitude, Jeffrey Dahmer's seemingly harmless nature, John Wayne Gacy's trust and betrayal, and David Berkowitz's crafty mystery are just a few examples of how killers are mythologized.

This focus carries the risk of romanticizing their crimes by elevating their personalities, struggles, and public personas above the lives and dignity of their victims. The sensationalized depiction of criminals and the ongoing dehumanization of victims are problematic elements in true crime narratives.

In short, such portrayals should be avoided at all costs. Some people may argue for the educational purpose of these narratives, which is understandable. Some future suggestions in that case are given which should be followed to achieve the maximum positive influence.

5.4 Recommendations of the Study

Victim-Centered Approach

Future narratives should also focus on the lives, individual identities and experiences of each victim. Also, the use of language should be such that should restore their human side and should signify their individuality.

Ethical Framing

Sensationalist tones should be avoided that make any attempt to romanticize serial killers and in any way try to present them as a sight-worthy spectacle. Future narratives should also examine the crucial factors enabling these crimes

Balanced Storytelling

Balanced storytelling techniques should be employed which should refrain from overshadowing the victims and nor putting too much focus on serial killers' personal narratives.

Educational Purpose

Future narratives should focus more on educational purpose of the crime documentaries and should try to educate the audiences about systematic dysfunctions which enables these killers and their crimes.

Advocacy for Victims

The future narratives should also include the victims' friends and family's perspective to create a respectful and balanced narrative that emphasizes human cost of these crimes. Victims' voices should be a crucial part of these documentaries. Future narratives can take the form of a more ethical storytelling which gives respect to the victims, gives awareness to audiences, and avoids romanticizing the criminals. This change would then contribute to a more responsible and balanced representations of crime and justice

The social significance of these recommendations lies in their ability to change how society views crime and those affected by it. By focusing more on victims and their individual lives, crime narratives can help restore their dignity and remind audiences that they were real people, not just names or numbers. Avoiding sensational and romanticized portrayals of serial killers is important because it prevents society from admiring or glorifying violence. Balanced storytelling ensures that victims are not overshadowed by offenders, which promotes a fair and ethical view of crime. When documentaries focus on education rather than entertainment, they help audiences understand the social and institutional failures that allow such crimes to happen, encouraging awareness and prevention. Including the voices of victims' families and friends highlights the true human cost of crime and promotes empathy, responsibility, and respect, ultimately contributing to a more ethical, informed, and socially responsible representation of crime and justice.

5.5 Future Research

- Future studies can combine qualitative frame analysis with quantitative content analysis to measure frequency of certain tropes (e.g., screen time given to killers vs. victims). This adds both depth and statistical backing.

- Conduct surveys, interviews, or focus groups with documentary viewers to explore how they interpret celebrification, sympathy, and victim marginalization. This helps bridge the gap between production and consumption.

- Analyze online communities (Reddit, YouTube comments, Twitter/X) where viewers discuss serial killer documentaries, to see how discourse extends beyond the documentary itself.

- Future research could interview directors, producers, or editors to uncover why they foreground killers and sideline victims—shedding light on editorial/market pressures.

- Instead of only text/narration, future studies could apply multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) to examine how visuals, music, and editing work alongside language to construct meaning.

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