



# Guilty Pleasure: How the Representation of Murder in Media Affects How Society in The United States Perceives These Crimes



Fernanda Carranza

Faculty Sponsors: Cynthia Mitchell, M.A.; Darren Ilett, PhD and MLIS  
University of Northern Colorado, Center for Human Enrichment



Google Images 2020

## Review of Literature

Many crime shows focus mainly around the killer or the crime, and it intrigues the world to the point where they become parts of everyday conversation in a term that Wiest (2016) utilized, and they are a part of western culture like a perverse icon. However, according to a study conducted by Levin and Wiest (2018), when it comes to stories about mass killers, there is an increased interest in reports focused on the hero of the crime.

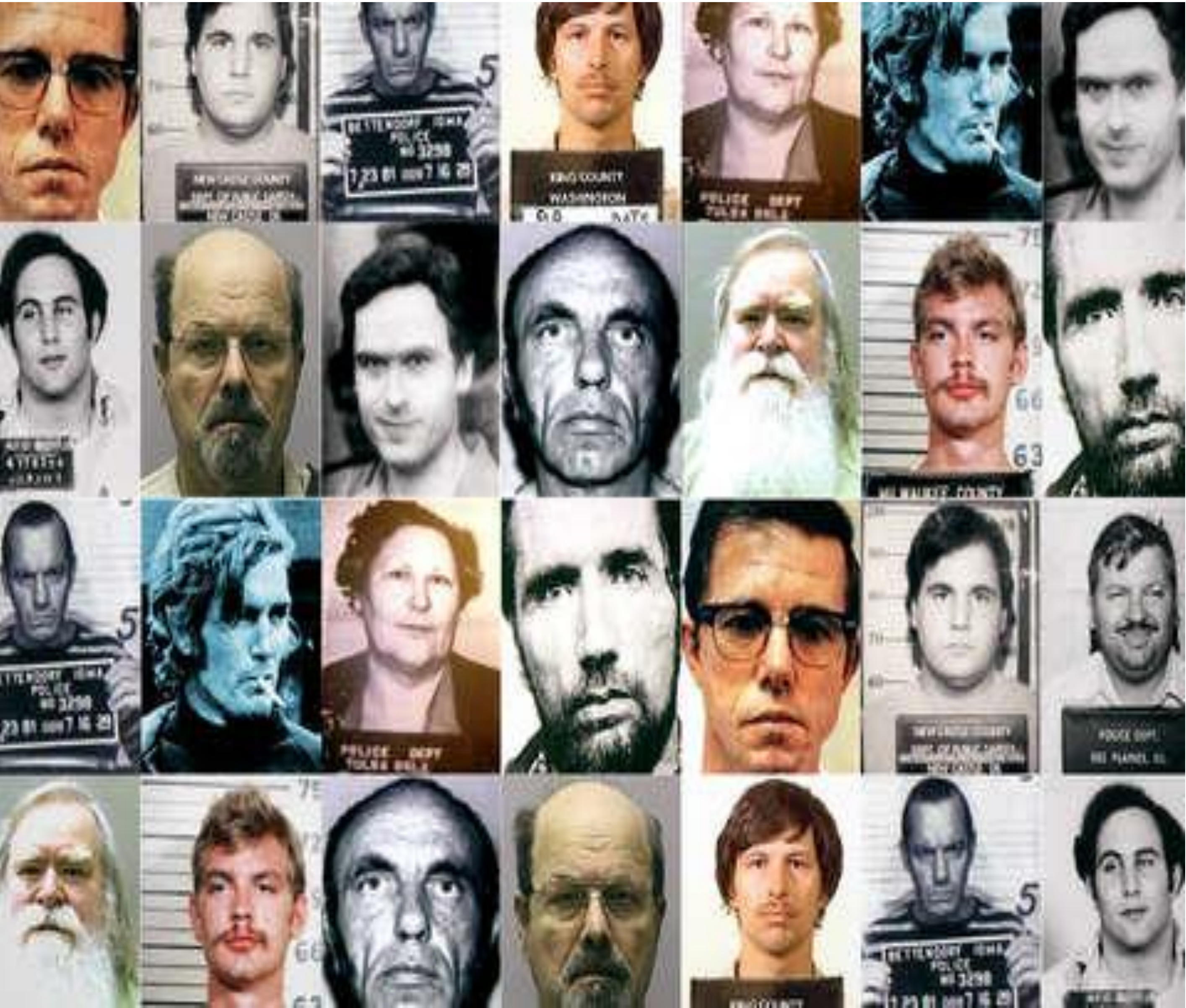
To further an issue with the way a crime of extreme violence is reported in western society also brings in an issue as to how it leaves an image with the public eye that could lead to a negative impression that Helfgott (2015) described as “mean-world syndrome.” On the other hand, the publicity can lead to a copycat hero as referred to by Levin and Wiest (2018) when a person wants to create a name for themselves by saving the day from a murderer.



Google Images 2020

## Abstract

When a person thinks of the word attraction, most would go to that one man or woman who catches their eye, or maybe the cute dog that would be hard to not give your attention to; however, there is one point of attraction, romantic or not, that people seem to have a guilty pleasure for—killers. This could be a person who simply cannot avoid not talking about the latest true crime story, to the person who idolizes the criminal, to even the person who would seek a romantic relationship with someone convicted of murder. It brings to question why so many people are intrigued by this type of person when their crime should be assumingly ignored and shunned by the public. Some of the most horrific crimes may have also been televised or documented in the public eye, with the increasing number of crime documentaries and shows being produced to speak of the “true” story. This brings to question why is it that murder, a crime believed to be the most taboo, is the one that receives the most attention from the world and what is it that makes it so impactful in the memories of people. It could simply be the way that the story is reported on that simply hooks people in, or it can be the way a person’s mind functions that would attract them with the idea of what they are looking for in their lives. If so, there may be a change in how murderers are viewed if the story of their crime is shown under a different light than what we see today.



Google Images 2020

## Discussion

There can be positive sides to a way that a story is reported in the world when a hero can be created as inspired by a previous story as Levin and Wiest (2018) stated, or as they have also included in which a lesson can be taught in providing information to avoid the creation of a killer. The style in which the news reports the information varies by culture, as Wiest (2016) provided an input on how differently the United States and United Kingdom report a story on a serial killer. It lies on the spotlight that is given to the killer if one should be provided at all. There are constant news reports and documentary films or series appearing on some sort of violent crime, and the attention the killer receives is worrisome. As in the case of the Sandy Hook shooting, the killer “...was named in 1,780 news stories, the majority of which were published without any details about the victims” (Levin & Wiest, 2018, p.2).

The style in which a story is reported can give a person many views as to how the world is seen by a person by either providing the image of an uncaring, horrible world (Helfgott, 2015) or one that creates a spotlight for a killer and can have them seen as a god or romantic interest (Langman, 2018). Yes, the life which a person lives in is a big factor in who the person becomes, but the media culture that surrounds them provides an equal impact of involvement in their life.



Google Images 2020

## Conclusions

The reporting style used by the media changes the way a killer is seen by the masses. The U.S. image creates celebrity status, yet the British image shows a monstrous within the person. The fearmongering is not needed, however. Stripping a murderer of celebrity status but shedding a light on the actions being despicable can be key to changing the way the world views the latest crime or show about a crime. Informing the public and providing less of a mysterious and fanatical air when speaking about a murderer in general cannot only lead to providing them with less of a spotlight but also enlightening the public that the world is not the doom and gloom that the news reports. Information leads to more understanding and less pain on the side of a possible murderer and a possible victim or victims.

## Contact

Fernanda Carranza  
Center of Human Enrichment (CHE)  
Email: carr7812@bears.unco.edu

## References

Brookes, M., Wilson, D., Yardley, E., Rahman, M., & Rowe, S. (2015). Faceless: High-profile murders and public recognition. *Crime, Media, Culture: An International Journal*, 11(1), 61-76. doi:10.1177/1741659014567969

Call, C. (2019). Serial entertainment: A content analysis of 35 years of serial murder in film. *Homicide Studies*, 23(4), 362-380. doi:10.1177/1088767919841660

Donnelly, A. M. (2012). The new american hero: Dexter, serial killer for the masses. *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 45(1), 15-26. doi:10.1111/j.1540-5931.2011.00908.x

Helfgott, J. B. (2015). *Criminal behavior and the copycat effect: Literature review and theoretical framework for empirical investigation* doi:10.1016

Krahé, B., Möller, I., Huesmann, L. R., Kirwil, L., Felber, J., & Berger, A. (2011). Desensitization to media violence: Links with habitual media violence exposure, aggressive cognitions, and aggressive behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 100(4), 630-646. doi:10.1037/a0021711

Langman, P. (2018). Different types of role model influence and fame seeking among mass killers and copycat offenders. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 62(2), 210-228. doi:10.1177/0002764217739663

Mrug, S., Madan, A., Cook, E. W., III, & Wright, R. A. (2015). Emotional and physiological desensitization to real-life and movie violence. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 44(5), 1092-1108. doi:10.1007

Wiest, J. B. (2016). Casting cultural monsters: Representations of serial killers in U.S. and U.K. news media. *Howard Journal of Communications*, 27(4), 327-346. doi:10.1080