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The Quiet Killers on the Big Screen:
The Portrayal of Female Serial Murder in Film

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Abstract

Despite its relative rarity, the public is fascinated by serial murder. This fascination can be evidenced by the popularity of various types of entertainment media, particularly films, focusing on serial murder. The present research analyzes the content of 38 films featuring acts of female-perpetrated serial murder in order to understand what information the public may glean about female serial murder from film. Male serial killers have been the subject of much academic study and media attention, however, their female counterparts have been largely ignored or treated less seriously despite committing acts of equal severity. The characteristics of female serial killers (n=38) and their victims (n=209) across the films are compared to real world female serial murder data from the Radford University/Florida Gulf Coast University Serial Killer Database to determine how accurately female serial murder is represented in film. Results of this analysis indicate that films misrepresent female serial murder in multiple ways including their motivations and methods of killing, however, the films do portray certain aspects of female serial murder correctly including certain victim characteristics.

Keywords: serial murder, film, gender, content analysis

Introduction

Serial murder is a statistically rare phenomenon. Official statistics indicate that there were 16,425 murders and non-negligent homicides in the United States (U.S.) in 2019 (United States Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2020). Although there are no official statistics for serial killers, it is estimated that approximately 1% of all murders in the U.S. can be attributed to serial killers (Fox, Levin, & Quinet, 2018). Fox and colleagues (2018) estimate that female serial killers made up about 6.1% of all U.S. serial killers operating between 1970 and 2016. While male serial killers are more common, this does not mean that the acts perpetrated by female serial murderers are any less severe. As Hickey (2016) states, “These are the quiet killers. They are every bit as lethal as male serial murderers, but we are seldom aware that they are in our midst because of the low visibility of their killing” (p. 308).

Misperceptions, such as the idea that serial killers are all males, surround serial murder (Morton & Hilts, 2008; Walters, Drislane, Hickey, & Patrick, 2015). Incorrect information regarding serial murder persists due to the academic knowledge about serial murder being generally limited (Hodgkinson, Prins, & Stuart-Bennett, 2017). Compounding this issue is the reinforcement of stereotypes about serial killers propagated by the media (Hodgkinson et al., 2017). Despite the heinousness of the act, serial murder is a theme found in various entertainment mediums (Schechter, 2003). Film may be the greatest medium of serial killer entertainment as hundreds of movies about real and fictional serial killers have been produced (Hickey, 2016).

There is little empirical research addressing the portrayal of serial murder committed by women in film. This gap in the research requires attention because the general public often uses the media as their source of crime knowledge, especially when the crime is out of the ordinary and unlikely to impact them directly (Raftar, 2006; Surette, 2015). Although films about serial murder are presented as entertainment, it is likely that a portion of the viewing audience believes that the portrayal is an accurate representation of reality (Dowler & Zawilski, 2007). The present study aims to analyze the content of films featuring acts of female-perpetrated serial murder in order to understand what information the public may learn about female serial murder from film.

Literature Review

Understanding Serial Murder

In the 1980s, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) sought to differentiate between different forms of multiple murder and created the categories of mass murder, spree murder, and serial murder (Hodgkinson et al., 2017). While differentiated from other forms of multiple murder, it has been difficult to establish a precise definition of serial murder with varying definitions stemming from policies, organizations, and academia. In 2006, the FBI’s Behavioral Science Unit hosted experts in various fields at a symposium in order to create a standard definition of serial murder (Morton & Hilts, 2008). The agreed upon definition of serial murder from the symposium was “the unlawful killing of two or more victims by the same offenders in separate events” (Morton & Hilts, 2008, p. 12). This is still the FBI’s definition of serial murder, but the definition has been criticized for painting serial murder too broadly. Various definitions of serial murder are still found in the academic literature. Academics utilize varying definitions of serial murder revolving around the number of victims, the time dimensions of the killings, and the motivation of the killer (Adjorlolo & Chan, 2014; Haggerty, 2009; Hickey, 2016; Osborne & Salfati, 2015).

The Female Serial Killer

While the male serial killer has been the subject of much academic study and media attention, the female serial killer has routinely been ignored or treated less seriously despite committing acts of equal severity (Kelleher & Kelleher, 1998). An example of this is exhibited in the monikers that are given to female serial killers by law enforcement and the media. Male serial killers are often given nicknames that emphasize the brutality associated with their murders or to induce fear (such as “The Boston Strangler” or “The Night Stalker”) whereas female serial killers are often given names that emphasize their gender or sexuality (such as “The Beautiful Blonde Killer” or “The Giggling Grandma”) (Harrison, Hughes, & Gott, 2019; Hickey, 2016).

The subject of female serial murder gained national attention in 1992 with the trial of Aileen Wuornos. Between 1989 and 1990, Wuornos shot and killed seven men while working as a prostitute in Florida (Newton, 2006). Wuornos was labeled as the first female serial killer in the U.S. by both the FBI and various media outlets (Hickey, 2016; Newton, 2006). The designation bestowed upon Wuornos was entirely inaccurate as there were female serial killers operating across the U.S. as far back as the 1800s, including women such as Jane Toppan, Lucretia Patricia Cannon, Belle Gunness, Mary Jane Jackson, and Lydia Sherman (Newton, 1993).

Female serial killers differ in their backgrounds and crimes compared to their male counterparts. According to Harrison and colleagues (2019), female serial killers are more likely to have attained a higher level of education, be of a higher socioeconomic status, and be in a relationship at the time of their murders than male serial killers. In their selection of victims, female serial killers are more likely to target those known to them, such as acquaintances and family members, whereas male serial killers are more likely to victimize strangers (Farrell, Keppel, & Titterington, 2011; Gurian, 2011; Harrison et al., 2019). Female and male serial killers also appear to be motivated by different factors with female serial killers most likely to be motivated by a financial incentive while male serial killers are most likely to kill for a sexual motivation (Fox et al., 2018; Harrison et al., 2019). Methods used to kill their victims also vary between female and male serial killers with female serial killers being the most likely to poison (47.3%) their victims while male serial killers are most likely to shoot their victims (Hickey, 2016), asphyxiate their victims (Harrison et al., 2019), or use a combination of methods (Gurian, 2017). Aileen Wuornos was unique because her background and methods aligned with the general profile of a male serial killer, which likely explains her erroneous label (Hickey, 2016).

Serial Killers in Film

Serial killers have been depicted in film since the beginning of the medium and have been consistently popular film subjects (Jenkins, 1994). As a testament to their popularity, the number of films produced about serial murder increases every decade. Hickey (2016) identified 32 films about serial murder released between 1960 and 1979, rising to 183 films about serial murder released between 1980 and 1999, and finally over 500 films about serial murder released between 2000 and 2015.

Films about serial murder have 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 work in the film *Monster* (2003), where she portrayed serial killer Aileen Wuornos (Schmid, 2005).

Popularity and critical success do not mean that serial murder is depicted accurately in film. Using a random sample of 50 films featuring fictional serial killers, Call (2019) found that movies inaccurately portray multiple characteristics of serial killers and their victims including the race, motivations, and fates of the serial killers as well as the sex, race, and method of death of serial murder victims.

The portrayal of serial murder across the films was not found to be completely inaccurate, however, with certain characteristics of serial murder portrayed in the films aligning with empirical research including the mobility and sex of serial killers, age categories of serial murder victims, and the relationships between serial murder victims and their killers. Turning specifically to gender, female serial killers made up 15.1% of the sample of serial killers across the films. Considering that a common myth about serial killers is that they are all male (Morton & Hiltz, 2008; Walters et al., 2015), this percentage, although slightly overrepresented, does fall in line with the empirical literature on female serial killers. Other than their presence across the films, Call (2019) offered no further analysis on the specific portrayal of female serial killers and their victims.

The Influence of Entertainment Media

While the primary purpose of a particular piece of media may be to provide entertainment, that media can still have persuasive effects on the viewer (Appel, 2008). The role of entertainment media in shaping public perceptions may be even more influential than the role of the news media as the general public spends over twice the amount of time watching entertainment media compared to news 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.

How can something designed expressly for entertainment, which may also present inaccurate information, shape public opinion? 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 the version of reality that is presented even if that version is a misrepresentation of the truth (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner et al., 1977; Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, Morgan, & Jackson-Beeck, 1979). Although cultivation theory focused on television as the mechanism for influencing beliefs, the theory can be generalized to other types of media (Hawkins & Scherr, 2017). Film, in particular, is a significant source of information about crime for the general public (Rafter, 2006). As the number of films portraying serial murder have increased, it stands to reason that films about serial murder have become more influential in shaping the public’s perceptions about serial murder.

Methodology

Content analysis is the systematic examination of cultural artifacts in order to draw inferences about the messages being communicated (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2014). The portrayal of various issues relevant to the field of criminal justice, including mental illness (Owen, 2012), police corruption (Gustafson, 2007), rape (Bufkin & Eschholz, 2000), and stalking (Schultz, Moore, & Spitzberg, 2014) have been examined through content analyses of films. The present study aims to analyze the content of films featuring female serial killers in order to determine what types of information the public may learn about serial murder committed by female killers. This information will be used to provide a discussion comparing the differences between the portrayal of female serial killers in film and real-world data on serial murder perpetrated by women.

Sampling

The Internet Movie Database (IMDb), an online movie reference website, and VideoHound’s Golden Movie Retriever (Tyrukus, 2019), a film reference book, were used to identify the sample of films for the present study. IMDb promotes itself as the largest and most popular film website in the world with over 250 million unique monthly visitors and a searchable database of over 5 million movies and television programs

(IMDb, n.d.). VideoHound (Tyrukus, 2019) features an extensive listing of nearly 30,000 films available on all home entertainment formats as well as cross-referenced indexes of films based on their subject matter. IMDb and VideoHound (Tyrukus, 2019) were selected as the sampling tools for this study due to their reputations as comprehensive sources of film information as well as their successful use in selecting films in other content analyses (Call, 2019; Cecil, 2007; 2008; Flores, 2002; Gustafson, 2007; Leon & Angst, 2005; Schultz et al., 2014; Welsh, 2010; Welsh & Brantford, 2009).

A search was conducted on IMDb for feature-length, English-language films with the plot keywords “female serial killer,” “female serial murder,” and “female serial homicide.” Within VideoHound (Tyrukus, 2019), films in the index with the subject “Serial Killers” and that index’s cross-referenced index with the subject “Slasher Flicks” were compiled. Following the removal of duplicate titles between the IMDb searches and VideoHound searches, an initial list of 624 films was compiled. Plot summaries for each film were then reviewed and evaluated to determine eligibility for the study based on six inclusion/exclusion criteria:

1. The film must feature a female character identified as a serial killer. Any film where the identity of the killer was not explicitly shown was excluded.
2. The film must contain a female serial killer operating independently and not within a team of serial killers.
3. The female serial killer highlighted in the film must be fictional. Thus, no films with actual serial killers as characters, such as the previously mentioned *Monster* (2003), were included.
4. Only one film per female serial killer was eligible for inclusion in order to avoid overrepresentation of specific female serial killers that may skew the data. If the same serial killer was featured across multiple films in a series of sequels, only that female serial killer’s initial film appearance was considered for eligibility.
5. The film must be set in the U.S. or at least not identified as taking place in another country because the results from this study will be discussed in relation to data on female serial murder in the U.S.
6. The film must be grounded in reality with no supernatural, science-fiction, or fantasy elements.

Following the screening of the film summaries based on the above criteria, a final list of 38 films was produced for data collection.

Data Collection

A coding document was developed for this study through a review of the literature on serial murder and included two broad categories of information: serial killer characteristics and serial murder victim characteristics. The first category, serial killer characteristics, included the variables of age category at first kill, race, relationship status, motivation, employment status and occupation, and fate. The second category, serial murder victim characteristics, included the variables of sex, race, age category, relationship to killer, and method of death. Several variables had defined attributes, such as “adult” or “juvenile” for age category at first kill. Other variables, such as motivation and employment type, were left open-ended and attributes were created following data collection. The coding document was tested using three films that were excluded from the study for featuring a male serial killer instead of a female serial killer, but met all the other inclusion criteria. During

data collection, each film in the sample was viewed twice and coded by the researcher. Across the films viewed, data was collected for 38 female serial killers and 209 serial murder victims. The final sample of films along with their respective serial killer and number of victims featured in each film are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1: Fictional female serial killers in film

Year	Film	Name of Killer	Victims*
1956	<i>The Bad Seed</i>	Rhoda Penmark	2+
1969	<i>What Ever Happened to Aunt Alice?</i>	Claire Marrable	3
1976	<i>The Witch Who Came from the Sea</i>	Molly	3
1978	<i>Alice, Sweet Alice</i>	Mrs. Tredoni	4
1980	<i>Friday the 13th</i>	Pamela Voorhees	9
1981	<i>Butcher, Baker, Nightmare Maker</i>	Cheryl Roberts	3+
1981	<i>Happy Birthday to Me</i>	Ann Thomerson	7
1981	<i>Night School</i>	Eleanor Adjai	5+
1982	<i>Girls Nite Out</i>	Katie Cavanaugh	7
1983	<i>Curtains</i>	Patti O'Connor	6
1983	<i>The Final Terror</i>	Eggar's Mother	5
1983	<i>Psycho 2</i>	Emily Spool	3
1983	<i>Sleepaway Camp</i>	Angela Baker	11
1983	<i>Sweet Sixteen</i>	Tricia Morgan	4+
1984	<i>Fatal Games</i>	Diane Paine	5
1984	<i>The Initiation</i>	Terry Fairchild	9
1987	<i>Black Widow</i>	Catharine Petersen	4
1987	<i>Prettykill</i>	Francie	3
1988	<i>Cheerleader Camp</i>	Cory Foster	8
1990	<i>Misery</i>	Annie Wilkes	1+
1992	<i>Prey of the Chameleon</i>	Elizabeth Burrows	7
1993	<i>Snapdragon</i>	Unknown**	4+
1993	<i>So I Married an Axe Murderer</i>	Rose Michaels	0+
1993	<i>Trauma</i>	Adrianna Petrescu	8+
1994	<i>Serial Mom</i>	Beverly Sutphin	7
1995	<i>Deadly Sins</i>	Emily	3+
1997	<i>Office Killer</i>	Dorine Douglas	9
1998	<i>Urban Legend</i>	Brenda Bates	9
1999	<i>Eye of the Beholder</i>	Joanna Eris	3
2000	<i>Jill Rips</i>	Irene Reed	3
2002	<i>American Psycho 2</i>	Unknown**	10
2002	<i>May</i>	May Canady	5
2003	<i>Little Erin Merryweather</i>	Erin Merryweather	5
2007	<i>88 Minutes</i>	Lauren Douglas	3
2009	<i>Orphan</i>	Leena Klammer	2+
2011	<i>Alyce Kills</i>	Alyce	6
2013	<i>Nurse 3D</i>	Sarah Price	13

2015	<i>Sociopathia</i>	Mara	10+
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*A victim count with a “+” indicates that the killer had additional victims either alluded to or discussed, but not explicitly shown in the film

**The killers in these films use aliases. As their actual names are never revealed, their name is listed as “Unknown”

Results

The characteristics of the female serial killers found across the films are presented in Table 2. The female serial killers were predominately adults at the time of their first murder (89.5%) and every killer depicted was white with no minority representation present. A majority (58.8%) of the female serial killers were portrayed as being single or their relationship status was not discussed in the films. Slightly more than one-quarter (26.5%) of the female serial killers were depicted as being married at some point (currently married, divorced, or widowed) while the remaining female serial killers (14.7%) were shown to be dating or in a relationship during the events of the films. The four female serial killers depicted as being juveniles were excluded from the relationship data. Two of the four juvenile serial killers were portrayed as being pre-teens. Including relationship data for those individuals would distort the data, so the decision was made to exclude all of the juvenile serial killers from the relationship data.

Motivation categories were created following the data collection process. The female serial killers were motivated to kill by a variety of factors including revenge, financial gain, love or obsession, mental illness or past trauma, religion, and fame or success. The most common (31.5%) motivation amongst the female serial killers was revenge for some perceived wrongdoing. For example, Beverly Sutphin, in *Serial Mom* (1994), targets those who insult her family, such as the high school principal who criticizes her son and the teenager who stands up her daughter for a date. The second most common motivational category was mental illness or past trauma (26.3%) where the female serial killers were shown to be driven by irrational thoughts (sometimes demonstrated by hearing voices or having visions). Often, it was inferred that the mental illnesses of the killers were a product of past abuse in their childhoods. To illustrate, Erin Merryweather in *Little Erin Merryweather* (2003) and Molly in *The Witch Who Came from the Sea* (1976) were both shown to be sexually abused by their fathers leading to delusional behavior and hallucinations in their adulthoods. More than one-fifth (23.7%) of the female serial killers were driven by love or obsession for someone. In some cases, the love or obsession was of a sexual nature. In other cases, the love or obsession was centered around protecting individuals they cared for, such as Emma Spool in *Psycho 2* (1983) who killed to protect her son from vengeful community members following his release from a mental institution for his own string of murders.

A majority (63.6%) of the female serial killers were shown to be employed outside of the home during or immediately before their careers as serial killers while 36.4% of the female serial killers were not shown to have any form of employment outside of the home. The four juvenile serial killers were not counted in the employment data for the same reason as their exclusion from the relationship data. Additionally, one of the adult female serial killers was portrayed as being committed to a mental institution since childhood and was also not included in the employment data. Categories of employment were created following the data collection process. While not viewed as a traditional type of employment, due to the number of female serial killers shown pursuing higher education, “college student” was created as a category of employment and contained the largest percentage (23.8%) of female serial killers. The next most common category of employment, representing 19.1% of employed female serial killers was waitress. Following this, 14.3% of female serial killers were employed in the medical field (including a hospital nurse, athletic nurse, and veterinarian’s assistant). The remaining female serial killers were employed in fields categorized as arts/entertainment (including a movie

costumer and comedian), office workers, sex workers, and miscellaneous (including a high school cook, professional medium, and housekeeper).

Lastly, the most common (39.5%) fate of the female serial killers at the conclusion of their films was to be killed or at least appear to have been killed by an intended victim. If the female serial killer was not killed by the end of a film, they were most likely (26.3%) shown free and able to continue their crimes after eluding detection or law enforcement. Over one-fifth (21.1%) of the female serial killers were shown in custody or incarcerated by the closing scene of their films while the fate of the remaining female serial killers was ambiguous (10.5%) or involved suicide in lieu of capture (2.6%).

Table 2: Female serial killer characteristics

	% (n)
<i>Age Category at First Kill (n=38)</i>	
Adult	89.5 (34)
Juvenile	10.5 (4)
<i>Race (n=38)</i>	
White	100.0 (38)
Non-white	0.0 (0)
<i>Relationship Status (n=34)</i>	
Single or not revealed	58.8 (20)
Dating or in a relationship	14.7 (5)
Married	14.7 (5)
Widowed	8.8 (3)
Divorced	3.0 (1)
<i>Motivation (n=38)</i>	
Revenge	31.5 (12)
Mental illness or past trauma	26.3 (10)
Love or obsession	23.7 (9)
Fame or success	7.9 (3)
Financial gain	5.3 (2)
Religion	5.3 (2)
<i>Employed (n=33)</i>	
Yes	63.6 (21)
No	36.4 (12)
<i>Employment Type (n=21)</i>	
College student	23.8 (5)
Waitress	19.1 (4)
Medical field	14.3 (3)
Arts/entertainment	9.5 (2)

Office worker	9.5 (2)
Sex worker	9.5 (2)
Misc.	14.3 (3)
<i>Fate (n=38)</i>	
Killed by intended victim	39.5 (15)
Free	26.3 (10)
Apprehended	21.1 (8)
Ambiguous	10.5 (4)
Suicide	2.6 (1)

Characteristics of the victims of the female serial killers in the films are displayed in Table 3. Males represented the primary targets (58.9%) for the female serial killers while 41.1% of the victims were female. The overwhelming majority (93.8%) of the victims were white. Although specific ages were only given for very few of the victims, 82.8% of the victims were depicted as adults while 17.2% of the victims were portrayed as juveniles. A majority of the victims were acquaintances (57.4%) to their killer at the time of their death while 38.8% were strangers to their killer, and only 3.3% were family members of their killer. Victims were classified as acquaintances if they had been in at least one scene with their killer prior to any attempt on their life or if a previous interaction between the killer and victim was discussed. Victims were classified as strangers if they were never shown directly interacting with their killer prior to their murder or if it was inferred that they had never met. Victims were classified as family members if it was explicitly stated that the victim and killer were related by the victim, the killer, or a third party.

Categories describing the method of death for each victim were created following the data collection process. It should be noted that some victims were shown as dead, but were not shown being killed. Thus, the method of death was not always able to be determined. The majority (62.2%) of the victims were killed via forcible stabbing or cutting. This was most commonly accomplished by a knife, but a variety of weapons (scissors, axes, saws, etc.) were used on victims across the films. Death by being beaten or bludgeoned by any variety of objects (hammers, shovels, rocks, etc.) was the next most likely method of execution (8.6%) for the victims followed by asphyxiation (4.8%) through suffocation, smothering, or choking.

Table 3: Female serial killer victim characteristics

	% (n)
<i>Sex (n=209)</i>	
Male	58.9 (123)
Female	41.1 (86)
<i>Race (n=209)</i>	
White	93.8 (196)
Non-white	6.2 (13)
<i>Age category (n=209)</i>	
Adult	82.8 (173)
Juvenile	17.2 (36)
<i>Relationship to killer (n=209)</i>	

Acquaintance	57.4 (120)
Stranger	38.8 (81)
Family	3.3 (7)
Unknown	0.5 (1)
<i>Method of death (n=209)</i>	
Stabbed or cut	62.2 (130)
Beaten or bludgeoned	8.6 (18)
Unknown	5.8 (12)
Asphyxiated	4.8 (10)
Firearm	4.3 (9)
Vehicle	3.3 (7)
Poisoned	2.9 (6)
Drowned	1.9 (4)
Thrown or dropped	1.9 (4)
Misc.	1.9 (4)
Fire or burning	1.4 (3)
Electrocution	1.0 (2)

Discussion

Based on the results of the analysis, profiles can be created of the typical female serial killer and the typical victims of female serial killers portrayed in film. Female serial killers in film are portrayed as being white, an adult at the time of their first murder, employed, not in a relationship, motivated by revenge, and killed by an intended victim. Victims of female serial killers are primarily depicted as adult white males who are acquainted with their killer. These victims are most likely to be murdered via stabbing or cutting with an edged weapon.

The results of the content analysis will be discussed in relation to data on real female serial killers and their victims in order to gain an understanding of how accurately female serial murder is portrayed in film. The primary data source used for comparison to the data derived from the present study originates from the Radford University/Florida Gulf Coast University Serial Killer Database (or the “Radford Database”). The Radford Database is the largest database on serial murder in the world with over 150 variables related to more than 4,000 serial killers and 13,000 victims of serial murder (Aamodt, 2019). The Radford Database has been used to generate datasets for multiple scholarly studies on serial murder (Alley, Minnis, Thompson, Wilson, & Gillberg, 2014; Beard, Hunter, Kern, & Kiley, 2014; Fox et al., 2018; Leary, Southard, Hill, & Ashman, 2017). To generate the comparison dataset for the present study, the Radford Database was searched for records of female serial killers operating within the U.S. This search generated 161 female serial killers. Forty-nine of these cases were removed due to the female serial killers being part of serial killing teams. Out of concern over substantial amounts of missing data, an additional 28 cases were removed. This yielded a comparison data set of 84 female serial killers and 326 victims.

What Female Serial Murder Films Get Wrong

Female serial murder is misrepresented in film in multiple ways. First the female serial killers in the films were most commonly portrayed as being single at the time of their murders (58.8%) with only 14.7% of the killers actively dating and another 14.7% being married. The Radford database shows that 76.3% of female

serial killers were married at some point in their lives, but does not divulge the relationship status of female serial killers during their serial murder careers (Aamodt, 2019). Going beyond the Radford dataset for a better comparison between the films and reality, Harrison, Murphy, Ho, Bowers, and Flaherty's (2015) analysis of 64 U.S. female serial killers reveals that 54.2% of female serial killers were married at the time of their murders with only 8.5% being single.

The motivation behind serial murder perpetrated by female offenders across the films is also not in line with the empirical data. The female serial killers in the films were primarily motivated by revenge. Slightly under one-third (31.5%) of the fictional female serial killers were motivated to kill as a form of retribution against specific people or people belonging to specific groups. Real female serial killers are motivated by a variety of factors, but revenge only constitutes the motivation of 3.6% of female serial killers (Aamodt, 2019). Female serial killers are most commonly motivated to kill for financial gain or comfort (38%) (Aamodt, 2019). Only two of the female serial killers (5.3%) in the films were committing their crimes for economic reasons. Female serial killers in film are thus portrayed as more emotional killers who "snap" following a real or perceived wronging against them as opposed to calculated killers attempting to economically gain from their crimes.

Likelihood of employment among female serial killers is presented with some accuracy throughout the films, however, type of employment is portrayed inaccurately. Across the films, 63.6% of the female serial killers were shown to be employed. In the Radford Database, 48.8% of the female serial killers were represented as employed (Aamodt, 2019). While the films present female serial killers as more likely to be employed than reality, both sources of information present female serial killers as able to secure employment. Film portrayal and reality diverge more when type of employment is examined. Across the films, the female serial killers were most commonly portrayed as being college students (23.8%). In reality, few female serial killers achieve a college degree (6.0%) and female serial killers are most likely to be employed in the medical field as a nurse or some other form of caregiver (48.8%) (Aamodt, 2019). The medical field was the third largest employment category for female serial killers across the films, but still contained only 14.3% of the female serial killers.

A discrepancy also exists between the fates of the female serial killers presented across the films and reality. Across the films, only 21.1% of the female serial killers were shown to be apprehended by law enforcement while the most likely fate of the female serial killers was to be killed by one of their intended victims (39.5%). Among the female serial killers in the Radford Database, none of them were killed by one of their potential victims or by law enforcement. This inconsistency may be attributed to the notion that audiences may not find the capture of a serial killer in a film to be wholly satisfying. One of the draws for violent entertainment is the ability of entertainment to provide a sense of justice that would not be obtained in the real world (Goldstein, 1999; Vaughan & Greenwood, 2017). After witnessing a killer victimize multiple individuals throughout a film, audiences may not equate capture as justice and feel unsatisfied. Filmmakers may thus be playing to the belief that audiences desire immediate retribution for the actions of the villain.

The films in the present study also misrepresent the typical victims of female serial killers in two ways. First, according to the films, the victims of female serial killers are most likely to be an acquaintance (57.4%) of their killer, followed by a stranger to their killer (38.8%), and very unlikely (3.3%) to be related to their killer. In reality, family members make up the largest relationship category for victims of female serial killers with over half (53.2%) of victims being related to their killer (Aamodt, 2019). Second, the primary method of death (62.2%) for the victims in the films was through being cut or stabbed. Actual female serial killers rarely (3.6%) kill their victims in this way (Aamodt, 2019). Female serial killers are most likely to kill their victims through either poisoning (41.0%) or asphyxiation (33.8%) (Aamodt, 2019). Across the films, however, poisoning (2.9%) and asphyxiation (4.8%) were infrequently portrayed as the method of death for victims of female serial killers.

Cultivation theory tells us that high levels of exposure to media can result in the perceptions of the viewer aligning with the version of reality presented in the media, even if the presented version is inaccurate (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner et al., 1977; Gerbner, et al., 1979). According to the films in this study, female serial killers are single, college students, who kill acquaintances by stabbing or cutting them as an act of revenge before being ultimately killed by one of their intended victims. A persistent viewer of female serial murder films would come to accept this version of female serial murder as fact even though it does not align with the empirical data on female serial murder. This creates a misunderstanding among the public of the phenomenon of serial murder and, to a broader extent, female criminality. We know that entertainment media can influence public perceptions of justice policies. For instance, there is an association between crime drama viewing and support for the death penalty (Britto & Noga-Styron, 2014; Holbert, Shah, & Kwak, 2005). The version of reality portrayed by female serial killer films about female criminality can have the real impact of altering the viewer's support for policies relating to female offenders, especially violent female offenders.

What Female Serial Murder Films Get Right

It is not surprising that the portrayal of female serial murder in film is not completely accurate. While entertainment media does shape the perceptions of the viewing audience, it is still intended to be entertainment first and foremost. That said, the portrayal of female serial murder across the films in this study does align with the data on real female serial murder in certain instances.

The female serial killers in the films were portrayed as committing their first murder when there were adults with 89.5% of the female serial killers falling into this category. This portrayal is factually accurate as 91.6% of female serial killers begin their murders as adults (Aamodt, 2019). Second, the female serial killers in the films were portrayed as being white and 75% of real female serial killers are white (Aamodt, 2019). It should be noted, however, that this portrayal of race in the films is also problematic as there was no representation of non-white female serial killers. This portrayal endorses a commonly held myth that minorities are not involved in serial murder (Branson, 2013; Walsh, 2005; Walters et al., 2015). Jenkins (1998) offers the argument that the lack of portrayal of African Americans as serial killers in entertainment media may be due to the belief that African American characters are unlikely to appeal to mass audiences.

Elements of the portrayal of the victims of female serial killers were also similar to the empirical research on female serial murder victimization. First, the victims of female serial killers in the films were most likely to be males with 58.9% of the victims being male and 41.1% being female. This finding is very similar to real-world female serial killer victimization as 55.1% of female serial killer victims have been male while 44.9% have been female (Aamodt, 2019). Second, the portrayal of victim race generally reflects reality, but like the portrayal of the race of the killers, does oversimplify. Across the films, 93.8% of the victims were white. In reality, the most likely victims of female serial killers are white (79.3%), but minorities (20.5%) are victims of female serial killers to a higher degree than represented in the films (Aamodt, 2019). Third, the age categories of the victims in the films is also presented somewhat accurately. Adults were portrayed as the most common (82.8%) victims of female serial killers in the films. For real female serial killers, adults are most likely to be their victims (51.9%), however juveniles are much more likely to be victimized by a female serial killer than presented in the films (48.1% versus 17.2%) (Aamodt, 2019).

The level of accuracy displayed in the films could be explained by filmmakers drawing inspiration from the histories and crimes of actual female serial killers. Several filmmakers have claimed to base their fictional serial killers on real serial killers with certain aspects of their stories modified (Fox et al., 2019; Hickey, 2016; Simpson, 2000). A notable example of this is the influence of real-life killer Ed Gein on the portrayal of fictional serial killers in films such as *Psycho* (1960), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), and *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) (Fox et al., 2019). This may also shed some light on the inaccuracies of the films discussed

above as well. If filmmakers are drawing inspiration from actual female serial murder cases, they may be taking inspiration from the most sensational cases.

Limitations

This study is not without limitations. A purposive sampling technique was used to identify films featuring female serial murder. The possibility exists that some films may not have been captured in this sampling process. Thus, the present study does not represent a full picture of the portrayal of female serial murder in film. Further, films featuring portrayals of real female serial killers were excluded from the study. This decision was based on the belief that films featuring fictional female serial killers and films featuring portrayals of real female serial killers are two different categories of films and should be examined separately. A viewer may be more likely to accept what they are seeing as fact if a film is presented as a “true story” featuring the portrayal of a known female serial killer.

Additionally, several content analyses of other categories of films have limited their samples to only top-grossing films in a given year to ensure the widest possible audience had viewed those films (Bufkin & Eschholz, 2000; Sapolsky, Molitor, & Luque, 2003; Weaver, Menard, Cabrera, & Taylor, 2015). In the present study, no consideration was made for the popularity of the films in the sample. The present study, however, is not unique (Call, 2019; Cowan & O’Brien, 1990; Weaver, 1991; Welsh, 2010; Welsh & Brantford, 2009) in selecting films without regard for their box office popularity. As films are now widely available through streaming services for home viewing, box office earnings may not be the best indicator of how widely viewed a film has been.

Lastly, although the literature suggests that the public gains much of its information about crime and criminal justice through the media (Rafter, 2006; Schmid, 2005; Surette, 2015), it is unknown how much of the public’s knowledge about serial murder comes from the media. It is also unknown what the viewers of these films already know about female serial murder. A viewer making the choice to watch one of these films is likely aware that the film is about serial murder and making the choice to watch the film based on an interest in the subject. Thus, it is unknown how a viewer of these films interprets the information presented to them and if they accept that the information as accurate.

Conclusion

Despite the popularity of film and the impact of film in shaping public perceptions of crime and criminal justice issues, scholarship has largely ignored examining the messages about crime and criminal justice portrayed in film (Rafter, 2006). Acknowledging its limitations, the present study contributes to the academic literature and the growing field of popular criminology by providing a thorough examination of the portrayal of female serial murder in film. The films in the present study portrayed several aspects of female serial murder with varying degrees of accuracy including the age, race, and likelihood of employment of female serial killers as well as the sex, race, and age of their victims. That said, there were multiple inaccuracies about female serial murder demonstrated across the films as well. While films are meant to just be entertainment, through their portrayals of female serial killers and their victims, they do have the potential to shape the beliefs of the general public toward a phenomenon they are unlikely to experience first-hand.

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