

# **Lights, camera, criminal: Examining media portrayals of serial killers and their reception in online discourse**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*True crime has become a dominant genre in contemporary media culture, raising complex ethical questions about representation, sensationalism, and public fascination with violence. This thesis examines how serial killers are portrayed in various media formats and how audiences respond to these portrayals when reviewing them online. Using Jeffrey Dahmer as a case study, the study analyzes the dramatized series *Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* and the documentary *Conversations with a Killer: The Jeffrey Dahmer Tapes*, as well as audience reviews gathered from Rotten Tomatoes. The study is based on Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model and framing theory, which together help in understanding how media texts are constructed and how audiences actively negotiate meaning. The study uses qualitative content analysis to investigate how each media format constructs character, frames moral responsibility, and engages with cultural narratives about crime and justice. With an examination of 223 Rotten Tomatoes audience reviews, the study also explores how audiences interpret and respond to these portrayals, focusing on the emotional, ethical, and ideological dimensions of viewer reactions. Findings reveal five major themes regarding the representation of Dahmer: 1) The many faces of Dahmer, 2) Dahmer as a product of social institutions, 3) The idea of the "monster," 4) The aesthetic monster, and 5) Dahmer through the eyes of others. Findings also reveal that while the two formats differ stylistically—utilizing distinct narrative techniques, emotional tones, and aesthetic strategies—they frequently construct similar characterizations of Dahmer. This suggests that true crime media may be influenced by underlying cultural frameworks that transcend genres. Audience responses ranged from empathy to ethical critique, confirming Hall's encoding/decoding model and demonstrating that viewers actively engage in negotiating the meanings presented to them. The study adds to media and cultural studies by emphasizing the increasingly participatory role of audiences, the narrative constraints of true crime storytelling, and the ethical tensions that arise when real-life violence is mediated for the public. It advocates for a greater emphasis on both media form and audience agency in understanding how crime narratives are constructed, received, and contested in the digital era.*

**KEYWORDS:** *true crime, serial killer, representation, participatory culture, audience reception*

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## 1. Introduction

The true crime genre has experienced significant growth over the past decade. However, critics have recently condemned this genre for its worrying tendency to idealize violent criminals. A recent example of this is the case of Luigi Mangione, a man who committed murder and yet was supported and romanticized on social media for his physical appearance (Matthews, 2024). This trend has now evolved into a cultural phenomenon that has garnered the interest of media scholars. Serial killers have become a notable source of fascination for people, and infamous individuals like Ted Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmer, and John Wayne Gacy have become cultural icons. Their quotes and images have been incorporated into popular culture and appear on T-shirts, mugs, and other products (Milde, 2021, p. 1). While the genre originated as a subculture, it has since gained popularity among the general public, with numerous streaming services capitalizing on its appeal. Netflix's *Making a Murderer* (2015) served as a pivotal moment for the genre. Since then, platforms such as Netflix, HBO, Hulu, and Amazon have released more than 50 true crime documentaries, many of which have achieved considerable success (Dhaliwal, 2024, p. 6). The quantity of true crime stories produced by platforms and the range of formats in which they are presented both demonstrate their broad appeal. Given that the genre has become increasingly popular, it is essential to consider how these portrayals are constructed and differ across formats, as well as how audiences react to them (Wiest, 2016, p. 327; Gaynor, 2023, p. 1).

The way serial killers are portrayed in the media has a significant impact on modern society. Positive representations of serial killers have the potential to skew public empathy by normalizing harmful behaviors and reorienting focus from victims to offenders (Fludzinski, 2024, pp. 10-15). According to studies on the effects of media and online communities, online media has played a significant role in the idolization of violent offenders by diverting attention from their crimes to their looks and perceived vulnerability. According to Young (2019, pp. 29-31), online forums create spaces where violent people are revered, with conversations usually concentrating on their traits rather than their crimes. However, viewers' reactions have not been homogeneously positive and seem to vary depending on the type of portrayal. One point of criticism in the true crime genre is the sensationalism of real-life tragedies. For instance, victims'



families criticized Netflix's *Dahmer - Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* (2022) for taking advantage of their traumatic experiences without permission (Tumin, 2022). Recent research suggests that positive representations of serial killers can affect public perception. Nonetheless, academics frequently overlook the intricacy of these representations and the variety of public responses. For instance, the literature often oversimplifies the concept of positive representation, frequently depicting it as mere idealization or sympathy without acknowledging the variations that may arise from different formats and narrative styles. Additionally, numerous studies undervalue the audience's capacity to challenge the narratives they engage with. This gap highlights the need to explore how viewers make sense of true crime stories—sometimes critically—rather than assuming they passively absorb problematic narratives.

Amid the increasing prevalence of true crime content on streaming platforms, a notable instance is the portrayal of Jeffrey Dahmer, an American serial killer and sex offender who committed the murders of seventeen men and teenage boys from 1978 to 1991. This study looks at how Dahmer is portrayed in two different media formats: the documentary "Conversations with a Killer" and the dramatized television series "Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story." Henceforth, they will be referred to as simply "Conversations with a Killer" and "Monster." In this context, it is important to clarify the key differences between the formats under study. The term "dramatized series" refers to a television program that adapts events or stories into a scripted format, employing creative storytelling techniques to enhance viewer engagement (Briggs & Wagner, 1979, p. 81; Wensley et al., 1990, p. 24). Documentaries, on the other hand, utilize observation, archival footage, and interviews to convey authentic stories and present accurate information about people, events, or phenomena (Przylipiak, 2023, pp. 34-35). Analyzing both media formats and audience reviews provides insights into how different production methods and viewer interpretations interact to construct meaning around serial killers. This research is especially pertinent at a time when media consumption is at an all-time high and social media is amplifying public discourse on crime (Anand & Taneja, 2024, pp. 8-9).

Previous research has examined the sexualization of serial killers, their celebrity status, and their monstrous portrayals in fiction, true crime documentaries, and the news (Jimenez, 2023; Chauhan et al., 2024; Wiest, 2016). Additionally, research shows that audiences generally approach dramatized series influenced by entertainment-oriented motivations, social factors, and escapism (Simons, 2014, pp. 2231-2234; Lacalle, 2015, pp. 241-242), while other studies

indicate that audiences typically engage with documentaries in a way that is both emotionally resonant and intellectually engaging (Jones, 2020, pp. 17-18). While audience reception within true crime communities has been examined in great detail (Gaynor, 2023; Fathallah, 2022), most existing studies examine either one media format in isolation or focus exclusively on audience or content rather than exploring the relationship between the two. This thesis fills these gaps by comparing portrayals of the same case in a dramatized series and a documentary and exploring how audience reactions vary. To achieve this, the study employs qualitative content analysis, utilizing a codebook derived from existing literature, to examine both media formats and audience reviews published on the online platform Rotten Tomatoes. This study will, therefore, answer the following: *How does the portrayal of a serial killer vary across different media formats, and how are these portrayals received by audiences engaged in online reviewing?*

The structure of this thesis is as follows. In the first chapter, the current scholarly discourse on serial killers in the media is summarized. The literature on how these characters are portrayed in various media formats is examined, the importance of audiences as active co-producers of meanings about these characters is discussed, and important theoretical frameworks are introduced. Chapter 2 describes the methodology, which is based on qualitative content analysis of the two media formats and audience reviews posted online. The analysis thoroughly examined factors such as the use of killer archetypes (including the monster, victim of circumstance, and tragic figure), the use of charged or emotive language, and the depiction of victims. The results of the comparative analysis are presented in Chapter 3, which examines how Dahmer's character is portrayed in both media formats and how online audience reviews reinforce or challenge these portrayals, emphasizing the interactive process through which meaning is collaboratively constructed between media texts and viewers. Finally, Chapter 4 addresses the research question by examining how these depictions may reflect the audience's perceptions of morality, justice, and serial killers. It also suggests ways for future research. This thesis aims to demonstrate that, despite stylistic and narrative differences, both documentaries and dramatizations may overlap in their representations. By examining media content and audience comments, the study enhances our understanding of how media format, narrative structure, and audience involvement collectively shape the cultural significance of crime and justice.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

The following section will present the theoretical framework that supports this study. It will provide a comprehensive overview of the key ideas, theories, and literature that have shaped the research. The goal of this thesis was to fill the gaps in the existing literature by integrating multiple datasets (media texts and audience reviews) into a single, exploratory, qualitative analysis. To do so, the theoretical framework is organized as follows: First, a summary of the key debates in the literature about how serial killers are portrayed in the media will be provided. Next, the conversation will shift to Netflix's significance as a major platform for meaning-making in today's media landscape, particularly in the true crime genre. Then, it will discuss audience studies in the context of true crime, examining what we know about how different people react to and understand these stories. Following this, the theme of aesthetics and genre expectations will be presented, focusing on how serial killers have been found to be portrayed in various media formats and how these portrayals either meet or deviate from what people expect. Lastly, the study's contribution to the field will be summarized, along with the gaps in the current body of research. This theoretical framework aims to establish a robust theoretical foundation for the subsequent empirical research, which will ultimately contribute to understanding how modern media constructs narratives about serial killers.

### **Serial killer representations in the media**

The media has had a significant impact on how people perceive crime and justice for a long time. The way news, movies, and TV shows have portrayed crime, the legal system, and people's fear of crime have had a significant impact on how people perceive these issues (Pollak & Kubrin, 2007, p. 59). Historically, media coverage has focused on crime through the perspectives of the victim, the perpetrator, and the broader social and political context (pp. 60-63). A key concern in media studies is sensationalism, a concept that has been extensively explored in research on crime reporting. Uzuegbunam (2013) argued that sensationalism makes events seem more interesting by exaggerating or changing them (p. 71). He argued that this is a form of editorial bias in the media, where content is inflated to reach a wider audience, often resulting in a focus on the most shocking aspects of a crime story.

Scholars have also examined the sensationalist portrayal of serial killers in different media. Pace (2019), for example, conducted a content analysis on 120 online news articles about

a dozen serial killers. She concentrated on six thematic content areas: theories of causation, references to the death penalty, support for the death penalty, loaded terminology, and positive and negative references to personal character (pp. 35–36). Her findings highlighted that the media frequently sensationalized and presented serial killers in a biased manner (pp. 63–65). In contrast, Das (2022) used a qualitative lens to examine how three films depicted serial killers. Her selection criteria included visual and cinematic elements, such as camera angles, killer archetypes, and sensationalist language. Her study's findings demonstrated that movies play a significant role in the sensationalism surrounding serial killers. The killers' characteristics were highlighted, such as leading a normal, family-oriented life or having a close relationship with their family. While both Pace and Das emphasized sensationalism, their findings have different implications: Pace argued that the media plays an ideological role in reinforcing punitive views of justice, whereas Das demonstrated how aesthetic techniques in film may shape viewer perception by romanticizing or humanizing killers. Together, these studies highlight how format-specific storytelling tools—such as visual imagery in film versus textual framing in news—have various implications for representation.

However, in the past few years, the media's coverage of serial killers has gone beyond just sensational crime reporting or straight news-like objectivity. Instead, as scholars have noted, it has become an aesthetic phenomenon that happens at the intersection of crime, entertainment, and commodification (Connelly, 2010, as cited in Chauhan et al., 2024, p. 35). Because they are now seen as both criminals and entertainment, serial killers are often shown in ways that make it hard to tell the difference between made-up stories and real violent crimes. This change in how serial killers are shown as entertainment has led to the growth of an entire industry. As a result, serial killers are no longer just the subject of media attention; they have become cultural icons, and their stories are retold and marketed in new ways to attract more viewers and generate more revenue (Irons, 2021, pp. 3-4). The way serial killers are portrayed now is less about reporting facts and more about making stories that play on people's interest in the macabre.

Overall, the media has shown serial killers in three main ways: as sexual objects, as celebrities, and as monsters. Firstly, because the actors who play these characters are conventionally attractive, people have converted serial killers into sex symbols (Jimenez, 2023, p. 3). This sex appeal can make the killers more famous, especially among women, because the attractive actor's appeal is often attributed to the serial killer (Jimenez, 2023, pp. 3-4).

Additionally, a lot of media attention has been given to the personal lives of serial killers, making them famous and glamorizing their crimes (Chauhan et al., 2024, p. 42; Wiest, 2016, pp. 335-336). On the other hand, some depictions have focused on horrible images, making the crimes seem even worse to draw in viewers. For example, Wiest (2016) found that reporters have used words like "deranged," "sadistic," "evil," "maniac," and "predator" to reference serial killers. They have also used phrases that suggest the threat of a dangerous animal, like "a serial killer on the loose," and talked about law enforcement "hunting" the person responsible (pp. 334-335). Wiest (2016) and Jimenez (2023) presented opposing viewpoints on the dominant character tropes applied to serial killers, which results in a paradoxical dynamic in which killers are both feared and desired. These portrayals may not be mutually exclusive—indeed, some media texts create characters who are both monstrous and seductive, such as Hannibal Lecter or Joe Goldberg. However, the implications differ: Wiest's framing promotes moral panic and dehumanization, whereas Jimenez demonstrates how celebrification and eroticism can normalize or glorify violence. The tension between monstrosity and celebrity is echoed in studies that examine media formats more closely. For example, Chauhan et al. (2024) and Wiest (2016) both note that serial killers are increasingly treated as celebrities, with a focus on their personal lives, backstories, and "charisma" (Chauhan et al., 2024, p. 42). This "star treatment" stands in stark contrast to monstrous imagery, implying a dichotomy in how audiences are supposed to interpret these figures: as terrifying criminals or fascinating icons.

Existing literature on serial killer representations has also looked at gendered portrayals. O'Donnell (2016) studied how tabloids and newspapers wrote about a male murderer and a female murderer in different ways (p. 2). The results highlighted enduring biases in the media. Journalists often blamed outside forces for the man's actions, but they often sexualized the woman and held her solely responsible (p. 13). For example, some journalists said that the male killer's actions were caused by mental illness by using phrases like "a psychopath strongly attracted to killing people" or "a long history of mental illness." There were also many references to his personal problems, like "his parents split up when he was a young boy" or "his father had not seen him in 10 years." Blame was also often placed on his upbringing (pp. 8-12). Picart (2006) also pointed out that the media shows male and female serial killers in different ways. Her research showed that female serial killers were often shown as tragic, ugly, and socially isolated, while male serial killers were often shown as charming, intelligent, and rebellious. She found

that the way the media portrayed female serial killers reinforced gender stereotypes by making them look like sad misfits instead of clever predators like their male counterparts (Picart, 2006, pp. 6-7). Even though these studies provided important information about the typical traits used to construct the representation of serial killers (like the celebrity, the charmer, the troubled, etc.), they did not fully consider how these portrayals may be shaped by, or partially influenced by, the conventions and narrative structures of the specific media format.

The media has also had a significant impact on how people perceive the truth, particularly in the portrayal of crime in various formats. For example, Latora (2020) discussed how journalism tries to report on crimes in an objective and factual way but also pointed out that biases still exist - some cases are covered in great detail while others are ignored; some victims are portrayed sympathetically while others are blamed for their own problems (pp. 15-16). Movies and other forms of entertainment often include crime, along with journalism. In these cases, the focus often shifts from the crime itself to the killer's personality. The stories are not just reported; they are also dramatized and sensationalized (Chauhan et al., 2024, p. 37). Other researchers who have looked at how serial killers are portrayed in movies and books have argued that it is hard to tell the difference between fictional and real serial killers in popular media (Simpson, 2000, as cited in Beckman, 2001, p. 61). Television also makes this more interesting. Researchers have found that TV shows, in particular, tell long stories that can help viewers see things from a killer's point of view and, in some cases, even feel sorry for them (Murley, 2008, as cited in Odendahl-James, 2009, pp. 243-246). Furthermore, the true crime genre is often associated with nonfiction, but this format sometimes blurs the lines between fact and fiction. Because it is based on real crimes, some people might think it is entirely accurate. Just as in journalism (Franks, 2016, as cited in Latora, 2020, p. 19), narrative framing and selective storytelling can influence how people perceive these events. Lastly, documentaries, which are supposed to be unbiased, have often relied on police investigations and first-hand footage. They give a more organized and fact-based account of what happened, and they generally stick closely to the facts (Chauhan et al., 2024, pp. 36-38). Nevertheless, even documentaries can shape stories in ways that alter how people perceive crime and justice (Chauhan et al., 2024, p. 41).

In the end, the way the media constructs serial killers has changed from straightforward news stories to complicated, stylized stories that mix fact and fiction and focus on how entertaining they are. These portrayals are not uniform; they vary significantly across media

formats and are shaped by sensationalism, commercialization, and deeply ingrained gender biases. While some scholars emphasize the media's power to shape public perceptions of serial killers, others propose that audiences engage with these portrayals in more active ways. However, existing studies often treat the media as a general entity, overlooking the distinct narrative conventions and constraints of different formats and how these may shape representations in unique ways. Similarly, while scholars have explored how serial killers are represented, less attention has been paid to how audiences make sense of those representations within specific media formats. This highlights the need for an analysis that not only considers the formal conventions of different media formats but also explores how audiences interpret, negotiate, or challenge the portrayals they encounter.

### **Why Netflix?**

Over the past 20 years, the rise of streaming services, such as Netflix, has significantly altered media consumption habits. The switch from scheduled programming on traditional TV to on-demand streaming has transformed the creation, consumption, and dissemination of content. Streaming services represent not only a technological advancement but signify a cultural and social change that is reshaping media consumption and breaking down traditional media frameworks. Ercegovic and Ercegovic (2023) argue that these changes provide a unique perspective on the transformation of the global media industry (p. 51).

#### *Netflix as a platform and social practice*

Netflix is among the most renowned and widely recognized streaming services globally. It has changed the way people consume entertainment content, attracting over 270 million paying subscribers across more than 190 countries (The Investopedia Team, 2023). Unlike traditional TV, which has strict schedules, Netflix enables users to select from an extensive library of content across diverse languages and genres at their convenience (Netflix, 2000). As a result, people's viewing habits have evolved due to the accessibility of content consumption. This shift reflects the increasing demand for flexibility and customized entertainment, marking a departure from the episodic, network-driven model of television consumption (Ercegovic & Ercegovic, 2023, p. 52). Another important factor in Netflix's success is its advanced algorithmic recommendation system. The platform utilizes data analytics to select content based on user

preferences, thereby enhancing the viewing experience (Ercegovac & Ercegovac, 2023, p. 56). This level of personalization not only keeps users interested but also changes the types of content that become popular. Unlike traditional broadcasters that rely on set programming, Netflix continually updates its content based on viewer behavior, which has a significant impact on global viewing habits.

### *Netflix studies & media research*

Academics have examined the representation of complex societal issues in Netflix content. Studies have looked at several topics, such as how love and sexual themes are portrayed in Netflix shows (Masterson & Messina, 2023) and how mental illness is portrayed in kid-friendly media (Donohue & Swords, 2024). Other research has examined how Netflix influences social issues, including the frequency of e-cigarette portrayal in its shows and movies, as well as its impact on young adults (Allem et al., 2022). Additionally, it has explored the moral implications of violence in teen-targeted shows (Yu et al., 2023). These studies highlight Netflix's dual role as both a platform that influences public opinion and a distributor of entertainment.

Furthermore, crime stories have long been a popular genre in the media, but Netflix has helped elevate their popularity and made them a significant part of its streaming library. According to Ring (2022), the turning point came with the release of *Making a Murderer*. This highly regarded documentary series sparked much conversation and brought true crime into the public eye. Netflix has since made significant investments in the genre, creating well-known documentaries (Ring, 2022). Despite this growing body of scholarship, surprisingly little attention has been paid to Netflix's portrayal of crime, particularly serial killers, even though true crime has become a central part of the platform's content strategy.

### *Netflix audiences: From passive viewers to co-creators*

Netflix's true crime content engages audiences on the platform and has also sparked conversations beyond it, fostering an interactive viewing culture (Kuscu-Ozbudak, 2021, pp. 537–538). This shift from passive to active viewers is indicative of broader media trends, where viewers are co-creators of meaning rather than merely consumers of content. This transformation is consistent with Jenkins' (2006, pp. 5-6) concept of participatory culture, in which fans go



beyond consumption and actively participate in the production of cultural meaning. Additionally, Netflix's algorithmic design encourages active engagement. Tailoring recommendations based on viewing history produces a dynamic viewing experience that encourages a more profound exploration of related content (Matthew, 2020). Viewer engagement often extends to external platforms, such as online review sites and social media, where individuals share interpretations, critiques, and emotional responses to Netflix content (Farrelly, 2009). In this way, Netflix has evolved from being a content provider to a platform where people can actively engage with the media landscape and contribute to the cultural conversation about their favorite shows and documentaries.

Recent studies on online participation provide insight into the increasing engagement of audiences in the creation and dissemination of media content. For example, Farrelly (2009) examined Rotten Tomatoes, a popular review website for film and television, and how it fosters a culture of participation through user-generated content, such as message boards where people discuss the aesthetics of movies and their societal impact (pp. 41-42). Farrelly (2009) noted that these user interactions, which included more than eight million individual posts, go beyond simple consumption to a more complex form of cultural participation (p. 41). They not only encourage active engagement but also add to the cultural conversation about entertainment products. This change aligns with the findings of Masip et al. (2019), who discovered that modern audiences are increasingly spread out and connected, opting for a more fluid and ongoing interaction with content rather than traditional methods of consumption. Rather than being tied to specific times or places, people now engage with the media whenever and wherever they choose. This flexibility shapes how viewers interact with Netflix's true crime content, allowing them to absorb and reflect on serial killer portrayals in a range of everyday settings. As a result, interpretations are not formed in isolation but are influenced by the personal, social, and digital contexts in which viewers encounter these stories.

Scholars have also examined the motivations behind consuming true crime content. For instance, Gulina et al. (2024) employed qualitative interviews and thematic analysis to investigate why people consume media, particularly serial killer content. The study found that young adults use true crime media to both set themselves apart from "deviant" behavior and to, in some cases, defend what serial killers do. People found psychological comfort in looking at criminal behavior, which helped them learn more about the extremes of human nature and

strengthen their own moral boundaries (Gulina et al., 2024, pp. 8–12). There has been much research on the emotional and psychological reasons why people watch true crime shows. However, less attention has been given to how audiences interpret the portrayals of serial killers within these narratives.

Beyond psychological incentives, true crime content serves as a forum for moral discussion. Trisler (2021) employed qualitative interviews to investigate how people responded to the Netflix documentary *Making a Murderer*, focusing on the contradictions inherent in true crime stories. Some people disliked how the documentary portrayed important individuals in a biased manner, but many appreciated it for drawing attention to unfair practices within the criminal justice system. This shows how audiences can perceive things differently. Some people agreed with the documentary's call for legal reform, while others thought it was a distorted or simple view of the world. These answers reveal that there are more significant moral issues within the genre, including the portrayal of characters and the potential for exploitation in stories (Trisler, 2021, pp. 42–73).

The rise of true crime content on social media platforms has also altered how people engage with it. Gaynor (2023), drawing on Seltzer's concept of "wound culture," conducted a textual analysis of a *Cult Liter* podcast episode on Jeffrey Dahmer, the related Instagram post, and user comments. She found that social media has made fan communities lively places where people who are interested in true crime talk to each other, share information, and seek approval by discussing famous cases. Gaynor (2023) also argued that social media is different from traditional media because it encourages people to participate and create their own stories, theorize about cases, and even connect with serial killers on an emotional level (pp. 1, 2, 5). This culture of participation raises important moral questions about how criminals are portrayed as more interesting. The study had some limitations, as it only examined one podcast, making it impossible to compare how audiences reacted to other types of media formats. Lastly, Fathallah (2022) conducted a qualitative analysis of Reddit posts to examine how fans, particularly those interested in true crime, establish boundaries within their community. She underscored that online communities run the risk of glamorizing or giving serial killers positive meanings by constantly talking about and judging them, which can make it hard to tell the difference between admiration and condemnation (p. 5645). Thus, representations of killers, whether positive or

negative, are shaped not only by media content and producers but also by the meanings audiences construct and share.

This study draws on cultural studies theory, particularly Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, as a framework for analyzing how viewers interpret portrayals of serial killers across different media formats. Hall's model examines how producers create media messages (encode) and how viewers interpret them (decode). He argued that people do not simply passively read media texts; they actively decode them in various ways, depending on their social, cultural, and personal situations. He presented three main decoding positions: oppositional, where the audience completely rejects the intended message; negotiated, where the audience partially agrees but changes some things based on their own beliefs; and dominant-hegemonic, where the audience fully accepts the intended message. This study employed Hall's encoding/decoding model to investigate how different audiences interpret representations of serial killers across various media formats. The framework allowed for an examination of whether viewers adopt a dominant, negotiated, or oppositional reading of the portrayals presented in the dramatized series and the documentary. In particular, it helped to analyze whether audiences reproduce, challenge, or transform the character constructions offered by these formats.

### **Aesthetics and genre expectations**

Research on specific media formats has revealed clear trends in how serial killers are portrayed, each influenced by narrative and cinematic decisions that cater to viewer expectations. These depictions not only reflect but also reinforce societal views on morality, evil, and crime.

#### *News media: Framing serial killers as celebrities or monsters*

News coverage has a significant effect on public opinion about serial killers. Wiest (2016) performed a qualitative content analysis of news articles from both the U.S. and the U.K. She found that American news outlets frequently portrayed serial killers as celebrities through two primary techniques: first, by highlighting the public's fascination with these cases—for example, one article noted, "All of a sudden he is like a star. Everybody is talking about him, and he is on the news"; and second, by framing their crimes as a form of perverse accomplishments, such as being labeled "the worst serial killer in New Jersey history." In contrast, British media tended to depict serial killers as monsters, achieved through three main strategies: (1) the explicit

use of the word "monster"; (2) the use of language suggesting a broad, geographic threat (e.g., "Two Serial Killers, Acting Independently, Terrorize Phoenix"); and (3) the use of dehumanizing and animalistic terms such as deranged, sadistic, evil, psychopathic, maniac and predator. This difference highlights how media framing can influence the tone and moral portrayal of serial killer narratives. Overall, Wiest's findings had a direct impact on the coding categories used in this study to analyze character construction, including the use of monstrous language and celebrity tropes.

### *Serial killer documentaries: Balancing authenticity and sensationalism*

Documentary storytelling adds another layer of complexity to media portrayals. Scholars, such as Chauhan et al. (2024), have highlighted that critics are often wary of the portrayal of serial killers in documentaries because they tend to put drama ahead of objective truth. One of the main complaints is that documentaries about serial killers often make the criminals seem more interesting while taking advantage of the pain of the victims and survivors (p. 37). This situation raises questions about the morality of true crime entertainment: Does the focus on storytelling make the crimes seem less serious? Moreover, do audiences also perceive it in this way? Chauhan et al. (2024) conducted a qualitative study on how the Netflix documentary *Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes* creates a feeling of authenticity. They found that the documentary established a sense of authenticity through techniques such as the use of expert interviews, old footage, and Bundy's voice recordings. However, it also made Bundy seem more human by portraying a man who is charming and clever (p. 40). For example, they emphasized the use of words like handsome, articulate, and intelligent, which were all used by the killer's friends, family, and even lawyers to describe him. They also highlighted how, in the documentary, friends of the killer discussed him before his arrest, saying things like, "He was a very nice person. He was the kind of guy you would want your sister to marry" (p. 41). This two-sided view is an excellent example of how documentaries often mix entertainment and reality, walking the fine line between dramatization and information. Chauhan et al.'s (2024) study highlights that even within a genre typically associated with truth-seeking, there is space for building a complex and even sympathetic character. Whether similar techniques are used in dramatized series or how audiences respond to such constructions across genres remains underexplored.

### *Fictional depictions: Serial killers as cultural icons*

Unlike news and documentary formats, fictional stories turn serial killers into interesting and scary characters. Jarvis (2007) examined how movies and TV shows portrayed serial killers within consumer culture, often portraying them as cultural icons or antiheroes. He argued that these portrayals may utilize fear and suspense to alter how people perceive the serial killer, potentially leading to personal or even sympathetic involvement (p. 327). In many fictional stories, a clear good-versus-evil framework is often employed, making the villains seem more interesting while also reinforcing moral differences. They also employ stylized cinematography, intense character development, and aestheticized violence to engage the audience emotionally (Thompson, 2001, pp. 57–58).

### *Biopics: Blending fiction and reality*

The hybrid genre of biopics dramatizes real-life serial killers while claiming the authenticity of a documentary. These movies look at the killer's childhood, social influences, and mental decline into crime and usually end with the killer being caught or dying (Milde, 2021, p. 23). Biopics differ from regular documentaries in that they interpret historical facts and transform them into stories that adhere to the conventions of cinematic storytelling.

To better understand the variations in representation across media formats, framing theory offers a helpful framework for analyzing how serial killers are portrayed, emphasizing features such as their crimes, psychology, or personal history. Goffman's (1975) framing theory posits that the media can influence how people perceive a story by emphasizing specific aspects of it. A frame is a way of presenting information that directs interpretation by drawing attention to particular elements. This study examined how Jeffrey Dahmer was portrayed in the media, not only across different formats but also within individual episodes and scenes. The complexity and fluidity of character construction in true crime narratives are highlighted by this method, which also demonstrates how multiple and occasionally conflicting frames can coexist or alternate within a single show. Understanding these frames helps identify the different character constructions made available by both media formats, which audiences may then adopt, resist, or reinterpret, offering insight into the range of meanings viewers might negotiate when engaging with Dahmer's portrayal.

## Gaps

While previous research has addressed both positive and negative portrayals of serial killers, they primarily focused on a single case within a single media format. Therefore, they fall short of explaining whether and how the unique features of various media formats contribute to these positive portrayals. Furthermore, these results imply that, in addition to providing information, media representations influence cultural conceptions of crime, morality, and even the essence of evil itself. These studies have provided insightful information and classifications that helped operationalize the ideas presented in the methods section and guided the deductive, theoretically informed creation of a codebook. They have, however, failed to consider important aspects of how serial killers are portrayed. For instance, considerable research has examined the psychological and emotional reasons why people watch true crime shows. However, less attention has been given to how viewers interpret these portrayals and construct meaning from them. Additionally, studies often overlooked the textual and visual elements—such as narrative structures, visual aesthetics, and storytelling techniques—that could contribute to romanticization in various formats. Furthermore, while studies have examined specific media formats separately, the distinctions between media formats—particularly in how they portray the same serial killer—have not been adequately addressed. To fill these gaps, this thesis examined how audiences engage with and respond to different portrayals through an analysis of a documentary and a dramatized series. By analyzing both the media portrayals and the audience's interpretive discourse, this study offers an integrated account of how serial killers like Jeffrey Dahmer are represented and understood across media formats.

### **3. Methods**

This study examined the portrayal of a serial killer across different media formats and how these portrayals were received by audiences engaged in online reviewing. For this purpose, qualitative content analysis was employed to examine how a serial killer was portrayed in the dramatized series *Monster* and the documentary *Conversations with a Killer*, as well as online reviews of both formats on Rotten Tomatoes. It specifically examined how stories were told, the visuals used, and how narratives were structured in both media formats. Given the focus of this thesis, a qualitative approach was best suited, as it enables a thorough description of media texts, the analysis of how specific frames are constructed within different media formats, and the explorations of how audiences decode these media messages, uncovering diverse interpretations (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Furthermore, the topic demanded an analysis of media narratives, which include visual, verbal, and symbolic elements that cannot be easily reduced to numbers. Qualitative research, which typically emphasizes textual and visual content in analysis, was thus appropriate for this study's purposes (Bryman, 2012).

#### **Data collection**

The worldwide popularity of *Monster* and *Conversations with a Killer*, both of which ranked highly on Netflix in over 60 countries (Youngs, 2022), highlights the public's fascination with true crime narratives. These two productions have garnered considerable attention in comparison to other similar series (Hailu, 2022), underscoring their cultural influence. These productions have, therefore, been chosen to be the subject of this investigation. This sampling approach is particularly valuable because both media formats focus on the same serial killer; they were released on the same streaming platform and likely targeted the same audience. This unique circumstance provides a rare and compelling opportunity for a side-by-side exploration. By examining how audiences react to and engage with a dramatized series versus a documentary, we can gain a deeper understanding of how perceptions of the same subject shift across different formats. The dataset consisted of ten one-hour episodes of *Monster*, three one-hour episodes of *Conversations with a Killer*, and 223 Rotten Tomatoes comments. This selection was key to examining how format influences the portrayal of a serial killer. To contextualize the significance of these media, brief descriptions of each series are provided below.

*Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* (Murphy & Brennan, 2022)

This ten-episode Netflix series delves into Jeffrey Dahmer's life, focusing on the events of 1978 to 1991 when he murdered 17 people, mostly young gay men of color. In addition to examining Dahmer's actions, the series criticizes systemic issues such as institutional failures, racism, homophobia, and white privilege, which allowed his crimes to go undetected for more than ten years<sup>1</sup>. Despite receiving mixed reviews, it was a commercial success, quickly topping Netflix's ratings charts (Montgomery, 2022). In the context of this study, the show is classified as a dramatized series because it adapts real-life events into a scripted format, employing creative storytelling techniques—such as fictionalized dialogue, character development, and narrative pacing—to enhance viewer engagement (Briggs & Wagner, 1979, p. 81; Wensley et al., 1990, p. 24).

*Conversations With a Killer: The Jeffrey Dahmer Tapes* (Berlinger, 2022)

This three-part Netflix documentary marks the third installment in the *Conversations with a Killer* series. It examines Dahmer's crimes, which include murder, dismemberment, and cannibalization, using archival audio recordings from his time in custody. The documentary focuses on firsthand accounts to depict Dahmer's actions<sup>2</sup>.

The sample included all ten episodes of *Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* and all three episodes of *Conversations with a Killer: The Jeffrey Dahmer Tapes*. The episodes ranged from 50 to 64 minutes in length, with *Monster* episodes averaging around 55 minutes and *Conversations with a killer* episodes averaging about 60 minutes. This purposive sampling strategy enabled a focused examination of both dramatized and documentary representations. Each episode was treated as a separate data unit and analyzed individually using a codebook explicitly developed for this purpose. Specific scenes and segments were highlighted and compared for their narrative framing, language use, and character construction. A more detailed breakdown of the sample, featuring episode titles, numbers, durations, and summaries, is available in Appendix A. Episode transcripts were extracted directly from Netflix subtitle metadata and saved as text files for analysis. Screenshots of key scenes were captured using the laptop's screen capture function while viewing the episodes on Netflix. These materials were

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<sup>1</sup> (DAHMER Cast, News, Videos and More, n.d.)

<sup>2</sup> (Berlinger, 2022b)



organized into clearly labeled folders by episode, with each folder containing the transcript, screenshots, and corresponding analytical notes in Word documents. This organization facilitated close scene-by-scene analysis and supported the thematic coding process.

The analysis combined the media content with audience responses (user-generated content) and took into account viewers as active creators of meaning around the serial killer. The analysis of audience reviews on Rotten Tomatoes revealed not only format-based variation but also other shifts by episode, scene, tone, and depiction style, among others. It examined how differing representational strategies across formats shaped how audiences engaged with and constructed meaning around the serial killer figure. A preliminary reading revealed patterns that indicated audiences actively use the platform to share in-depth interpretations of the character even though this reviewing platform permits both lengthy and brief reviews on any aspect of the content. For example, a reviewer noted: "... With this series, I found myself feeling a little sorry for Dahmer ... I feel it did mean that he was shown in more of a positive light, instead of the dangerous predator that he was .... (45M)". A total of 223 reviews were examined, selected to provide a diverse sample of audience perspectives. Most reviews were written in English, though some were in Spanish and translated into English. Reviews were gathered from Rotten Tomatoes by searching for audience comments under both the dramatized series and the documentary. Each review was assigned a numerical code (1–223), followed by the appropriate code for media format (M for the dramatized series or CK for the documentary) for reference and organization during analysis. These codes were used to track emerging themes and ensure consistent comparison across the dataset. To ensure a systematic selection, the reviews were sorted by date, copied into a Word document for archiving, and later uploaded to Atlas.ti for coding and analysis. Duplicate reviews, and those unrelated to the study's aims were excluded. This included extremely brief comments (e.g., "Loved it!"), off-topic, or focused solely on elements like actor performances without engaging with the representation of Jeffrey Dahmer or the narrative content. The reviews were then anonymized by removing usernames and other identifying information. This analysis aimed to uncover patterns in audience reactions and assess how the different portrayals of Dahmer may contribute to public understanding and attitudes.

## **Data analysis**

This thesis used qualitative content analysis to examine the media's portrayal of serial killers in order to pinpoint important themes, trends, and wider ramifications of these depictions, especially about serial killers. According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005, p. 1278), content analysis is "a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns." This approach enables the analysis of both overt and covert messages (Bryman, 2012, p. 289). Using this approach, researchers categorize data into deductive and/or inductive codes, as outlined in a codebook. One important difference between these two coding styles is that inductive codes originate directly from the data, whereas deductive (or theory-driven) codes are derived from the existing body of literature (Schreier, 2012, p. 60). This study primarily employed deductive coding, drawing from prior research. However, the approach remained flexible, allowing for the emergence of new inductive codes that were not accounted for in the existing literature. The dataset was then organized and analyzed using Atlas.ti.

### *Operationalization and coding*

The study focused on Jeffrey Dahmer's portrayal, identifying recurrent narrative structures, visual aesthetics, and storytelling techniques, such as the use of specific props, including evidence or photos, as well as various shot types (Asmar et al., 2024, p. 6). As discussed in the theoretical framework, Das (2022) identified certain aspects of serial killer representation, such as killer archetypes (p. 121). This was adapted into the code used in this study, which comprises killer archetypes composed of five subcodes: monster/villain, victim of circumstance, tragic figure, celebrity, and cultural icon. Moreover, as discussed in the theoretical framework, Pace (2019) identified six different codes: theories of causation, references to the death penalty, support for the death penalty, loaded terminology, and positive and negative references to personal character (pp. 35-36). These were adapted into the study's codes: loaded terminology (e.g., using extreme language, humanizing terms, or sensationalism to describe Dahmer), positive attributes (e.g., references to the killer as a "normal" person), and negative attributes (e.g., descriptions depicting the killer in unfavorable ways).

To investigate media reception, the study also examined audience reviews, focusing on written reactions to depictions of Dahmer. Key coding categories were taken from academic

literature on audience reception analysis. These include: 1) emotional reactions, defined as expressions of shock, disgust, fascination, empathy, or fear (Teasdale et al., 2021); 2) moral judgments, defined as ethical concerns regarding the accuracy of facts, victim portrayals, or the glorification of criminals (Granelli & Zenor, 2016); and 3) assessments of authenticity, realism and aesthetics, defined as opinions on factual accuracy, acting performances and cinematography (Michelle, 2007). By examining these components, the study investigated how Dahmer was portrayed in various media formats and how online viewers understood these portrayals. The complete codebook is available in Appendix B.

In addition to these deductive codes, several inductive codes emerged organically during analysis. These included both subcodes and more general themes like sensationalism and the humanization of the serial killer. For example, the data showed that physical appearance, manipulateness, mental illness, and loneliness were frequently mentioned both in the media text and the audience reviews. Subcodes about childhood, social isolation, systemic failures, and social context (such as racism) also surfaced under the more general theme of the killer archetype victim of circumstance. These codes were informed not only by the textual data but also by observational notes recorded in a research diary throughout the process.

The coding process was carried out in several stages. First, the entire dramatized series and documentary were viewed for general immersion. Key moments were timestamped, and screenshots were taken during a second, more analytical viewing. After that, each episode's transcript was downloaded and read through line by line. While the overall approach was primarily deductive—guided by a pre-established set of coding categories based on existing literature—the process began with an inductive phase of open coding using Atlas.ti, in which pertinent quotes and segments were tagged. Following that, a second round of coding took place, during which the codes were refined by eliminating duplicates, modifying ambiguous labels, and grouping related categories. Subsequently, related codes were clustered to create themes. Finally, the decision on how to name and organize these themes was based on their recurrence, interpretive depth, and alignment with the research questions. Atlas.ti was used throughout the coding process to strengthen transparency and methodological rigor, ensuring consistent code integration across different parts of the dataset.

## Research ethics

This study adhered to ethical research standards by ensuring that its methodology was valid, reliable, and transparent. By clearly operationalizing key constructs, the study employed content analysis to enhance validity (e.g., codes related to positive characteristics were applied when the data reflected traits such as empathy, remorse, intelligence, charisma, or instances where the character was portrayed as caring or protective). Systematic coding techniques based on accepted frameworks were used to address reliability (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Bryman, 2012). The content was read several times, and the codes were contrasted with the categories of analysis that other researchers had found or employed. Additionally, a single-coder reflexive approach was employed to verify internal consistency. After coding every three episodes or every 50 comments, previously coded segments were revisited and cross-checked against the original codebook to ensure coherence in the application.

To strengthen the study's reliability and thematic depth, a sample of 223 audience reviews was chosen from the Rotten Tomatoes website. Only reviews from the review sections of *Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* and *Conversations with a Killer: The Jeffrey Dahmer Tapes* were collected. Notably, only 10 reviews were available for the documentary, while 213 pertained to the dramatized series. Purposive sampling was employed in the selection process to capture a range of moral, aesthetic, and emotional responses. Reviews that addressed Jeffrey Dahmer's portrayal or addressed the shows' narrative and artistic framing were included. Entries that were irrelevant, such as one-word comments, off-topic statements, or reviews that only discussed acting quality without discussing representation, were excluded. The codebook, which was developed through previous scholarly literature and refined through iterative analysis, was used to code the review data in the same manner as the media content. Following coding, review themes were compared between the two series and with the codes found in the media content. This helped to address the research question regarding how viewers interpret depictions of serial killers in various media genres by enabling analytical triangulation between formats and audience interpretations. All data were gathered from publicly available sources and used exclusively for scholarly purposes to preserve user privacy. In complete accordance with ethical research guidelines, all personally identifiable information was redacted. The study also acknowledged the delicate nature of its topic. It sought to minimize harm by avoiding direct

interaction with victims or their families, focusing instead on mediated representations and audience discourse.

## 4. Results

This chapter presents the results of a qualitative thematic analysis of the dramatized series *Monster* (referred to as “M” in the following paragraphs) and the documentary *Conversations with a Killer* (referred to as “CK” in the following paragraphs), as well as audience feedback from Rotten Tomatoes. To distinguish references to viewer comments from the two media formats, audience reviews will be cited using a numbered format, followed by the corresponding reference to media format (for example: 1CK for the documentary or 130M for the dramatized series). The analysis aimed to identify common themes, representations, and viewer interpretations across all formats. The findings were divided into five major themes that emerged from the data: 1) The many faces of Dahmer, 2) Dahmer as a product of social institutions, 3) The idea of the "monster," 4) The aesthetic monster, and 5) Dahmer through the eyes of others. By analyzing various facets of the serial killer's portrayal, each theme sheds light on the broader cultural and narrative frameworks at play.

### **The many faces of Dahmer**

Representations of the serial killer figure in both *Monster* and *Conversations with a killer* were not static or consistent; instead, they shifted both across different media formats and within individual episodes, revealing a fluid and layered construction. Audience reviews were susceptible to these changes, frequently analyzing how the story and characters were portrayed as they changed. For example, one reviewer shared about the dramatized series: "The show starts strong but soon sinks into a romanticized pity party for the infamous serial killer ...." (193M). The reviewer's observation of this change in tone suggests how viewers actively understand and react to variations in the killer's narrative framing. Moreover, Dahmer was portrayed as a dynamic character in both the documentary and the dramatized series, alternating between emotional disturbance, loneliness, and humanity. This was visible in the documentary, particularly, which included frequent jumps between timelines, a strategic choice to show in a few episodes different moments in the story. By using these calculated leaps, the documentary was able to depict Dahmer from a variety of viewpoints and timelines. To present a complex picture, the documentary also extensively utilized interviews and recordings from the past. Episode 1 exemplifies this structure: it begins with Dahmer's lawyer introducing herself and her

role in the case: "I was a young lawyer at the time. I was in my twenties ... I get this call from Jerry Boyle, my boss ...." (CK-ep1). After that, it jumps back to 1965 to show Dahmer's early life before shifting to the night of his arrest in 1991. For example, as seen in Figure 1, the documentary utilizes Dahmer's childhood photographs when discussing his early life.



*Figure 1. Screenshots taken from the documentary (episode 1)*

Through these production techniques, in a single episode, Dahmer was portrayed as a remorseless serial killer, a lonely child, a confused young man, and a manipulative individual. This multifaceted construction contrasts with research by Jimenez (2023), Wiest (2016), and Das (2022), which emphasize singular and consistent portrayals—whether as sex symbols, monsters, or archetypal figures. While Chauhan et al. (2024) also acknowledge the duality in documentary portrayals of Ted Bundy, they frame it as a narrative tension that develops over time. In contrast, this study discovered that such contradictions coexist even within a single episode. Thus, this multifaceted portrayal avoids reducing Dahmer to a single, stereotypical label. First, Dahmer is portrayed as a remorseless serial killer through crime scene evidence and testimonies from lawyers, as seen in Figure 2. For instance, the documentary frequently showed lawyers using terms like "homicidal maniac" or "killing machine" (CK-ep1) when discussing Dahmer.

Second, through interviews and professional commentary featured in episode 1, Dahmer was constructed as a severely lonely child. This is evident, for instance, when Dahmer was shown telling the lawyer about his early years: "... Jeff was adamant that there wasn't any huge traumas that would have caused him to do these things ... The one thing Jeffrey did tell me ... about his childhood ... was this constant bickering between his parents" (CK-ep1). Dahmer's childhood friend, who was introduced in the episode, was also shown talking about how lonely he was as a child: "When Jeff and I were growing up, I don't think he had a large group of

friends. I never really saw other people come over ...." (CK-ep1). Furthermore, when forensic psychologist Dr. Smail is shown talking about Dahmer's parental abandonment, he is portrayed as saying: "Jeffrey Dahmer never used the word abandoned by his parents, although I think that he might have been familiar with that feeling" (CK-ep1). This was related to the recording of Dahmer discussing his mother's departure with his lawyer:

“Wendy: The day she left to Chippewa Falls, you never talked to her again?

Jeffrey: Right.

Wendy: How did it make you feel at that time?

Jeffrey: Uh, depressed. Lonely and bored ... No one was at home ....”.



*Figure 2. Screenshots taken from the documentary (episode 1)*

Third, the documentary episode also featured Dahmer as a young man with conflicting desires. When the psychologist is shown discussing Dahmer's first sexual fantasy, he is portrayed as saying: "He fantasized about a jogger that came by frequently. He wondered what that person would look like without a shirt on ... It wasn't an object to kill him. It was an object to touch and explore the body ...." (CK-ep1), which Dahmer himself confirmed via the recordings: "I saw this guy hitchhiking. I thought it'd be nice to have someone around to talk with, and someone that I wanted to be with for sex" (CK-ep1). Finally, the documentary episode portrayed Dahmer as a manipulative person. For example, Dahmer's lawyer is shown talking about how Dahmer dismembered and placed the body of his first victim Steven Hicks in garbage bags:

He took the body, put the body into garbage bags, and was stopped by a police officer ... The officer took his flashlight and flashed it into the back, and there was the garbage bag with Hicks' dead body in it. The officer asked what it was ... Dahmer knew what was at



stake, and Dahmer was cool enough to say: Just on the way to dump the garbage. The officer believed him ... After that, he knew that he could manipulate. He knew he could make a statement to somebody and get away with it. (CK-ep1)

The above quote contributes to a more comprehensive portrayal of Dahmer as someone who swiftly identified and exploited the vulnerabilities of the people around him. This calm, calculated response in a time of crisis supports a narrative of emotional detachment and strategic deception, which are key traits in the documentary's framing of him as a predator who learned to maneuver through systems of power.

In contrast to the documentary's use of time jumps to present fragmented perspectives across a few episodes, the dramatized series—which contained more episodes—used cinematic flashbacks to increase tension, deepen character complexity, and shape emotional response, moving fluidly between Dahmer's final days, his childhood and significant events in his criminal past. In general, Dahmer was portrayed in opposing roles throughout the series. First of all, Dahmer was presented as the good boy, particularly during the period when he lived with his grandmother. In these scenes, he appeared to be acting in a kind and submissive way toward her, for example, by helping with household tasks, responding politely, and keeping his emotions in check. His grandmother's words and actions also helped to humanize him; she was frequently shown speaking of him with love and care, which softened his image and momentarily separated him from his violent tendencies. For instance, in episode 4 of the series, Dahmer and his grandmother were viewing a box containing his father's accomplishments, and Dahmer said he did not have a box like that:

“Jeffrey: ... I don't even have any memories like that to put in a box. I haven't won a ribbon for anything my whole life. Like a... a bad egg. I got a screw loose up here or something.

Grandmother: Jeff Dahmer, you look at me. There isn't a thing wrong with you that we can't fix ... You're a good boy, Jeff. You're every bit as good as your father ... You're good deep down, Jeff. You may not believe it, but I sure do.” (M-ep4)

The grandmother's description of Jeff in this scene may have contributed to the idea that he was a good boy who was merely sick and making an effort to be good. Second, he was portrayed as lonely in the series. Dramatizations and flashbacks were unique to the series. In

episode 3, for example, Dahmer's father moved to a hotel, his mother left, and he was left alone in the house for several months. The scene's lack of dialogue highlights the emotional void he feels. Dahmer's decline into alcohol abuse during the months he spends by himself is visually reinforced by close-ups of him drinking by himself, frequently framed in shadow or reflected in mirrors, and constantly going to the store to buy more alcohol, as presented in Figure 3. The documentary did not include these dramatized elements.



*Figure 3. Screenshot taken from the dramatized series (episode 3)*

Loneliness was also presented through his interactions with victims, many of whom he attempted to prevent from leaving. This supported the notion that the man was desperate to connect, even if it meant using horrifying methods. For example, in episode 1, the series depicts Dahmer and his victim Tracy in the apartment, where Tracy expresses discomfort over the smell:

“Tracy: Uh... Sorry, man. I think I'm gonna go.

Jeffrey: No. Don't leave. Why does everybody always wanna leave me?

Tracy: Leave you? What do you mean, leave you? I need some fresh air. It stinks in here.” (M-ep1)

Moreover, episode 3 shows Dahmer meeting his first victim, a hitchhiker named Steven, and inviting him back to his house, promising to give him a lift to a concert. As time passed and Steven realized they were not leaving, his frustration became increasingly visible. His facial expressions tightened, and his brows furrowed. His tone grew sharper and more urgent, and he was pacing around the room, gesturing toward the door as he insisted on leaving:

“Steven: No, man. Let's go.

Jeffrey: No. Hey, I don't want to go yet. Let's... Let's do ten more reps. I'll put two 25s on. What do you think?

Steven: Listen, man, you told me you would drive me to the concert, okay? I don't know what you wanted, but that's what I want. I want you to drive me there right now.

Jeffrey: But I don't want you to go.

Steven: Are you fucking crying?

Jeffrey: No.

Steven: What the fuck? Jesus. I'm... I'm outta here, man ...." (M-ep3)

This inconsistent and non-linear storytelling was also noticed and mentioned by reviewers of the dramatized series. For example, one reviewer shared: "It started out good, but it seemed to make Dahmer almost a sympathetic figure at times" (113M). Another also shared: "The different segments of Jeff's life and then his crimes are so chopped up that I wasn't sure if I was in his past or his present. There is no stable timeline ...." (54M). Online reviews of the documentary also referred to this, with one reviewer writing: "I still don't understand why a documentary decides to keep jumping back and forth between different points in time. I think this is just confusing" (7CK). As a result, the portrayals in both the documentary and the dramatized series do not depict Dahmer as a fixed entity but rather as a complex, evolving character. Audiences noticed and judged this complexity—sometimes with sympathy and sometimes with criticism. Among the many faces with which Dahmer was portrayed, one of the most recurrent was him as a victim of societal context, institutions, and broader structural failures. The following section provides a more in-depth examination of this aspect.

### **Dahmer as a product of social institutions**

A recurring theme in the audience reviews and media portrayals was the presence of social institution critiques put forth as justifications for Dahmer's crimes, which was mentioned in approximately 35 of the 223 reviews. One reviewer, for instance, stated of the documentary: "... it twists the satanic behavior of a mutant and uses it as a referendum on racial relations in society ..." (9CK). This suggests a discomfort with how the documentary reframes Dahmer's crimes through a sociopolitical lens, indicating resistance to the racial critique. On the other hand, audience reviews for the dramatized series frequently referenced this social and racial critique. One viewer noted, "The series doesn't shy away from the gruesome details of Dahmer's

crimes, but it also explores the systemic failures that allowed him to evade justice for so long" (35M), highlighting how the show underscores broader structural shortcomings—especially those within the justice system. Another stated, "... I do like the fact the show criticizes the way the police had dealt with the situation ... there were so many opportunities for Dahmer to get caught ...." (37M), reinforcing the perception of repeated law enforcement negligence. Some viewers, however, expressed discomfort with what they perceived as political overreach: "The part where they focus on Dahmer's story is good. The problem is the show gets increasingly political and devolves into race-baiting nonsense" (184M). Here, the critique of institutional racism is interpreted not as an exposé but as a political agenda, revealing a tension in audience reception. Finally, the visceral reaction in the comment, "I can't believe the freaking POLICE handed back the drugged 14-year-old Laotian boy ... to DAHMER, even after the neighbor begged them to take the Asian boy away from the serial killer ...." (208M), underscores how deeply the dramatization of racialized victim neglect resonated with viewers.

Collectively, these responses demonstrate that although the social commentary in the series had a significant impact on many viewers, it also generated controversy, exposing varying audience thresholds for political criticism in true crime stories. It is interesting to note that the most forceful criticisms of societal and institutional shortcomings appeared in comments about the dramatized series rather than the documentary. While this may seem unexpected, given that documentaries are generally perceived as more serious and politically charged, it is important to consider that the number of comments about the documentary was significantly lower, which may have influenced this outcome. Both the dramatized series and the documentary featured critiques of social institutions. In both media formats, Dahmer was presented as the result of structural failure. These portrayals emphasized how Dahmer's life was influenced by racism, law enforcement, and family, potentially implying that institutional neglect contributed to his growth and the persistence of his crimes. However, this framing raises concerns about accountability and whether portrayals like this could potentially shift the blame from the serial killer to other parties.

One of the institutional frameworks used to explain Dahmer's behavior was the family unit, shown as a site of early dysfunction and neglect. On the one hand, frequent flashbacks in the dramatized series showed trauma, an unstable home, and parental neglect. Although these scenes appeared only briefly—primarily in two episodes—Dahmer's mother's suicide attempt,

his parent's arguments, and their eventual abandonment of him were depicted to highlight key moments of his troubled childhood. This culminates in episode 8, where Lionel, Dahmer's guilt-ridden father, admits that he could have done more to support and help his son. On the other hand, the documentary only briefly discusses these family dynamics, mentioning parental conflict just once in passing rather than exploring it in depth. Overall, the documentary clearly departs from the dramatized series' approach by emphasizing the repercussions of Dahmer's actions over an analysis of his upbringing. Surprisingly, the majority of reviewers made no connection whatsoever between Dahmer's family history and his actions or personality. This was only mentioned in one review, which said: "... His mother took a ton of hard drugs while pregnant ... And his mother was mentally ill ... He really never had a chance for a normal life ...." (190M). This lack of engagement is particularly interesting given that the dramatized series devoted significant screen time to exploring Dahmer's troubled family background.

Furthermore, structural racism was also explicitly addressed. In the documentary, reporters and commentators criticized how racism and institutional indifference enabled Dahmer to carry out his murderous rampage for such a long time, a theme that runs throughout all three episodes. One reporter noted: "If the victims had been white and straight, more would have been done" (CK-ep2), while other reporters emphasized Dahmer's racial privilege as a white man, which enabled him to manipulate police. In contrast, the dramatized series expanded on this criticism by using heightened dialogue and confrontations. In a scene with the detectives, Dahmer insisted that physical attraction was the primary criterion he used to choose his victims rather than race. However, the Black detective challenged this by pointing out that Dahmer "purposefully moved into a Black community ... under-patrolled and underserved ... easier to hunt" (M-ep5). This incident directly criticized Dahmer's decisions, as well as the structural factors that enabled them. Notably, the two formats take distinct stances on systemic racism: the dramatized series employs fictionalized dialogue and character interactions to make systemic failures more emotionally immediate for viewers, while the documentary utilizes archival footage and expert commentary to present a factual critique.

Another recurring focus across both the documentary and the dramatized series was the inadequate response by police and the broader criminal justice system. This theme of institutional failure not only highlights law enforcement's negligence but also frames Dahmer as a figure enabled—and in some ways created—by systemic neglect and oversight. Throughout the

documentary, journalists and attorneys often talked about how police were unable to take reports seriously because of homophobia. A friend of one of the victims highlighted the broader context of the AIDS crisis, noting: "People would literally just disappear. Were they dead? Were they sick? Had they moved away? No one would know. Dahmer had a rare opportunity ... but no one was looking" (CK-ep2). Another reporter recounted officers making fun of witnesses and victims, describing the tone as dismissive and disrespectful: "Gay people were made fun of. They were the butt of the joke" (CK-ep3). On the other hand, the dramatized series addressed these shortcomings in compelling scenes involving Dahmer's neighbor, Glenda Cleveland, who consistently reported suspicious activity from Dahmer but was disregarded by the police. In a pivotal moment following Dahmer's arrest, she is shown saying to the officers: "... I called y'all, and I told you over and over a million times that something was going on, and you know what you did? Y'all did nothing!" (M-ep1). The most striking critique of institutional failure in the series came in episode 5 when Dahmer was given a one-year sentence for sexually assaulting a fourteen-year-old boy. The judge said: "... Now, Mr. Dahmer, looking at you right now, you remind me a lot of my grandson. ... You are not the kind of guy who belongs in the correction system, okay? You need a second chance ...." (M-ep5). While the series does not explicitly comment on this scene, it subtly presents the racial and class biases at play, leaving it to the viewer to draw connections between this moment and broader patterns of institutional privilege. This reliance on implication contrasts with *Conversations with a Killer*, which features more overt verbal critiques through interviews and commentary.

Mental illness was also a prominent theme, especially in the documentary where it was explored in depth, while it appeared less frequently in the dramatized series and was rarely mentioned in audience reviews. The framing of Dahmer as a victim of mental illness appeared very clearly in the documentary. A mix of Dahmer's lawyers and psychologists repeatedly discussed Dahmer around the frame of a sick man. For example, video footage from Dahmer's trial showed his lawyer presenting the insanity plea: "I accept the responsibility of proving to you that this was not an evil man. This was a sick man" (CK-ep3). The video footage also showed a psychologist during the trial who was explaining Dahmer's diagnosis: "The defendant's personality structure, his underlying way of looking at the world and himself, is diagnosed and meets the criteria for schizotypal and borderline personality disorders" (CK-ep3). Moreover, another psychologist mentioned in the documentary:

... If a man who is preoccupied with having sex with corpses, if a man who's drilling holes in the heads of human beings to try to keep them alive in a zombie-like state doesn't have a psychiatric disorder, then I don't know what we mean by psychiatric disease. How many people does someone have to eat in Milwaukee before they think you have a mental disease? (CK-ep3)

These quotes illustrate how the documentary strategically constructs a narrative that emphasizes Dahmer's psychological instability over his moral agency. This focus is partially due to the genre itself: to build credibility, documentaries often use expert commentary from professionals in fields such as law, forensics, or psychology. Because of this, clinical and diagnostic viewpoints naturally take center stage, which helps to explain why the documentary focused heavily on mental illness while the dramatized series gave it less attention. The documentary thus frames Dahmer not as inherently evil but as deeply ill—implicitly inviting the viewer to interpret his actions through a clinical, rather than purely criminal, lens.

On the other hand, the dramatized series did not directly address the frame of mental illness; instead this frame was created through Lionel, Dahmer's father. Lionel shares in different episodes of the series that he believes his son is sick and needs help. He even writes a letter to the judge in episode five, pleading with him to assist Dahmer while he is incarcerated: "... I sincerely hope that you might intervene in some way to help my son... I feel that this may be our last chance to do something lasting and that you, Your Honor, might hold that key ...." (M-ep5). As a result, even though the dramatized series does not overtly highlight mental illness as a major theme, it delicately does so through Lionel's point of view, portraying Dahmer's acts as signs of an untreated illness rather than pure evil. This subtlety mirrors the show's broader approach to institutional critique - suggesting systemic failures through implication and thereby inviting the audience to actively interpret and piece together these underlying themes.

Surprisingly, the mental illness factor was not discussed as frequently by audiences. Only two reviewers from the dramatized series commented on this aspect: "This show does not glorify Jeff Dahmer. It actually shows that mental illness is real and people need to be better aware of the signs. Especially parents!" (71M); "... I think it helps us to understand that the information is key to help people with mental illness and taboos have no place in this modern world anymore." (135M). The lack of audience engagement with the mental illness framing—despite its

prominence in the documentary—suggests that viewers may prioritize other aspects of the narrative, such as victim representation or media responsibility.

### The idea of the “Monster”

Additionally, Dahmer was frequently portrayed in both the documentary and the dramatized series using the "monster" archetype. The documentary mainly relied on others' verbal accounts to construct Dahmer as a monster. Detectives, journalists, and lawyers frequently referred to Dahmer as a "homicidal maniac," "cannibal," and "serial killer." These descriptions were supported in all three episodes of the documentary by crime scene photos of the aftermath of his killings, which included skulls arranged in his apartment, body parts stored in his freezer, and other disturbing evidence, as seen in Figure 4.



*Figure 4. Screenshots taken from the documentary (episodes 1, 2 and 3)*

In contrast, the dramatized series leaned more on raw, graphic imagery—designed to shock, disgust, and disturb the viewer. While the documentary emphasizes static, fixed elements and objects to convey its message, the series centers more directly on Dahmer himself and his actions. Scenes depicted Dahmer drinking human blood, cooking and consuming human flesh, and placing yellow contact lenses in his eyes to appear more like a demonic figure. This particular scene happened in episode 2 of the series, when Dahmer was shown with one of his victims, Konerak, at his apartment: “... Just watch the movie. Have you seen this? ... The Emperor, he's so fuckin' cool. Did you see my contacts? They're just like the Emperor's ... Tired of everyone leaving me. I'm just gonna make you my zombie” (M-ep2). In another particularly



disturbing scene, in episode 4 of the series, he was shown holding and kissing a severed human head, as presented in Figure 5. While both the documentary and dramatized series represent Dahmer as monstrous at times, they achieve this effect through different means: the documentary uses inference and analysis, while the series externalizes his internal pathology and dehumanization through disturbing dialogue and intense imagery.



*Figure 5. Screenshots taken from the dramatized series (episodes 2 and 4)*

The portrayal of Dahmer as a monster was further supported by how the documentary and the dramatized series showed his emotional detachment and ability to manipulate those around him. As it had been found with regards to Dahmer's portrayal as a manipulative individual, the documentary relied on others' verbal accounts to construct Dahmer as a manipulative psychopath. Psychologists were shown describing Dahmer as lacking empathy or remorse. For example, during a scene in episode 2, Dr. Smail was featured highlighting Dahmer's emotional disconnection: "He would kill somebody. The body would be upstairs in the bedroom. The grandmother would wake up, and Jeffrey would come down and have breakfast with her ... There's just a total detachment" (CK-ep2). Another psychologist was shown characterizing his behavior as: "His personality pattern was of an individual who uses people, sees them as objects, does not have any empathy" (CK-ep2). This sense of psychopathic coldness was further echoed by accounts of his manipulateness. During episode 3 of the documentary, Wendy Patrickus, Dahmer's lawyer, was shown recalling: "Jeffrey always had a quick response.

It seemed kind of natural to him to have that ability to manipulate and get himself out of bad situations” (CK-ep3). During the same episode, his neighbor was also shown expressing disbelief at how easily Dahmer deceived those around him: “Everyone in the building felt suckered. We all felt that Jeffrey Dahmer had played us” (CK-ep3).

Contrastingly, the dramatized series constructed this manipulative nature through Dahmer’s interactions with his neighbor, and other key scenes. One recurring moment was Dahmer deflecting suspicion from his neighbor Glenda by explaining away disturbing smells with lies about spoiled meat. The most harrowing example, however, occurs in the re-creation of the Konerak Sinthasomphone incident, where Dahmer was shown convincing the police to return the injured and drugged teenager to his custody by pretending they were in a consensual relationship. The officers accepted his explanation despite objections from concerned neighbors. This last example also points to the construction, in the dramatized series, of police institutions as flawed and biased, an idea that the findings have touched upon earlier. Overall, this subsection suggests that although Dahmer is portrayed as a “monster” in both the documentary and the dramatized series, they do so in different ways—the documentary uses verbal testimony and analysis, while the series uses graphic imagery and unsettling dialogue.

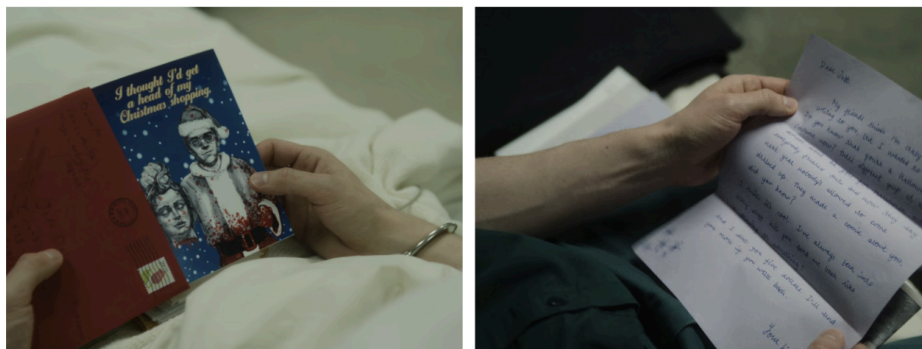
## **The aesthetic monster**

### *The celebrity*

Another theme that emerged from the data was the glamorization of the serial killer, particularly in how he was visually portrayed and discursively constructed in both media formats. Firstly, in both, Dahmer was constructed as a celebrity. In the documentary, Dahmer’s celebrity status is treated more as a byproduct of media attention—his trial becoming a “big show” is portrayed as a journalistic spectacle, reflecting the real-world consequences of sensational news coverage. For example, in episode 3, reporter Jeff Fleming was shown saying: “The trial was a big event. It had drawn a lot of reporters. Family members were there. It was now, you know, the big show” (CK-ep3). This quotation captures the media’s function in the documentary, turning a criminal trial into a spectacle and raising Dahmer’s profile.

In contrast, the dramatized series made this celebrity status an explicit narrative thread, particularly in episode 9, during Dahmer’s time in prison. As seen in figure 6, Dahmer is depicted receiving fan mail, money, and even being immortalized as a Halloween costume and comic

book figure. In the documentary, a writing is shown by an admirer: "... Do you know you're a Halloween costume now? Three guys at my school went as you for Halloween ... They made a comic book about you, did you know? I think it's cool ... Your biggest fan, Alice" (M-ep9). This striking difference likely stems from the inherent objectives and affordances of dramatized storytelling. Jarvis' (2007) concept of the serial killer as a cultural icon is particularly relevant here, as the dramatized series transforms a real-life case into a serialized spectacle. Unlike the documentary, which, like Chauhan et al. (2024), gives such fan attention moral weight, the dramatization uses these elements for narrative and affective purposes.



**Figure 6.** Screenshot taken from the dramatized series (episode 9)

In particular, the dramatized series also frequently emphasized Dahmer's physical appearance through aestheticized cinematography—utilizing close-ups of his body, prolonged shots of his face, and casting a conventionally attractive actor, as seen in Figure 7. This was noted by six audiences reviewing the dramatized series. One reviewer commented: "Dahmer is depicted as a sexy, quirky loner who likes beer and lifting weights. It's almost easy to not mind the sweet, crooning soundtrack and close-ups of Evan Peters's six-pack and pecs ...." (193M). On the one hand, as would be expected from the genre, the dramatized series may highlight the actor's physical attractiveness and celebrity, which is consistent with knowledge of such media formats. This emphasis on the actor's physical attractiveness is consistent with what Jimenez (2023) found in dramatized portrayals, where serial killers are often framed as sexually desirable figures, especially when played by conventionally attractive actors. However, the audience's responses seem more nuanced: instead of supporting or condoning this romanticized representation, three reviewers saw it as morally questionable or problematic. One reviewer critique stated: "... Jeffrey Dahmer killed and ate people! Why are we making a biopic about him with some handsome Hollywood actor playing him!? ...." (103M). Thus, audience responses to

Dahmer's celebrity-like portrayal were mixed, with some drawn in by the aesthetics while others condemned it as morally irresponsible.



**Figure 7.** Screenshot taken from the dramatized series (episode 3)

Thus, even when dramatized series rely on familiar stereotypes or conventions to attract positive audience reactions, the comments on Rotten Tomatoes suggest that viewers can be more critical—often questioning and challenging those very conventions.

### *The myth*

The documentary frequently employed loaded language that elevated Dahmer's crimes to a near-mythical status, framing him not only as a criminal but as a symbol of pure evil. This was particularly evident in the testimonies of professionals featured throughout the episodes. In episode 1, psychologist Dr. Smail was shown sharing about Dahmer's case: "I had a 30-year career in Milwaukee as a forensic psychologist, and Dahmer's case came mid-career for me. There were others that followed, but *nothing like this*" (CK-ep1). In episode 2, medical examiner Jeffrey Jentzen was shown sharing: "Forensic pathologists are used to seeing trauma, but this was something different ... And in the years that have passed, I have come to believe that that is a time that *I actually encountered evil ....*" (CK-ep2), contributing to a narrative of Dahmer as an almost supernatural figure of evil. These scenes are not incidental; instead, they reflect particular narrative and production decisions made in the documentary to emphasize the case's singularity, which furthers the mythologizing of Dahmer in popular culture. Crucially, this mythologizing was unique to the documentary; neither the dramatized series nor the audience's comments reflected it.

## **Dahmer through the eyes of others**

The portrayal of the serial killer in both media formats was significantly shaped by how his relationships with others were depicted. These connections contributed to the construction of a particular image of Dahmer, which fluctuates between monstrous and human. Notably, the two media formats used different techniques to construct these portrayals. The dramatized series heavily drew on romanticized, emotionally charged relationships, whereas the documentary relied on firsthand accounts. Audiences responded differently to these portrayals, especially in the dramatized series: some praised the nuanced portrayal of Dahmer's relationships as essential to comprehending the man behind the crimes, while others were concerned that this focus runs the risk of evoking undue sympathy for a notorious serial killer.

### *The empathetic figure*

Dahmer was constructed as an empathetic figure. Positive personal attributes were conveyed through the words of others. In the documentary, Dahmer's lawyer Wendy was shown saying: "He was very polite. I was somewhat surprised, I guess, at how cordial Jeff was" (CK-ep1). On episode 2, a neighbor of Dahmer was shown recounting a moment of generosity from Dahmer:

... I liked him because I felt that he had a soft heart. There was one time when my sister was getting married. I didn't have any money to get a gift for her. I told him: 'Is it possible you can loan me some money to get her a gift?'... He gave me \$60. (CK-ep2)

These quotes collectively demonstrate how the documentary utilizes the perspectives of others to create a more nuanced, sympathetic portrayal of Dahmer, presenting him not just as a villain but also as someone who might be viewed as trustworthy or even kind in casual encounters.

However, in the dramatized series, these traits were frequently constructed through scenes depicting Dahmer socializing. In addition to helping to explain how he enticed victims, his ability to come across as charming and charismatic—particularly in bars—also gave his character more depth and persuaded viewers that he was more than just a monstrous person. In episode 1, for instance, Dahmer was shown talking with three men at a bar. He offered to take naked pictures of them after introducing himself as an art photographer:

“Aaron: I don't know, honey. I'm not dropping my drawers for no \$50.

Jeffrey: What about you? You got a great jawline. Really good bone structure, I can tell. I saw you out on the dance floor. The light was hitting it, I could tell.

Tracy: All right. Sure.” (M-ep1)

This example illustrates how the dramatized series intentionally complicates Dahmer’s character by highlighting his charm and social skills. This scene highlights Dahmer’s ability to interact with people and navigate social situations. It invites viewers to see him not as a monster but rather as someone likable and captivating.

Moreover, both media formats also portrayed Dahmer as being capable of remorse. In the documentary, empathy was elicited through Dahmer’s voice, as heard in audio recordings. In episode 1, he is heard expressing regret over his actions: “I really made a sincere effort to change the way I was living, to change my desires” (CK-ep1), and in that same episode, he is heard talking about killing his second victim, Steven Tuomi: “I felt shocked. Uh...Panicked. And, uh... very sorry that it happened because I had no intention of anything like that happening” (CK-ep1).

In contrast, the series constructed a remorseful version of Dahmer through dialogue and character behavior. In episode 1, upon his arrest, Dahmer is shown saying: "For what I did, I should be dead." In episode 8, during his trial, Dahmer is shown saying: "... I didn't ever want freedom. Frankly, I wanted death for myself ... I feel so bad for what I did to those poor families, and I understand their rightful anger ....". Furthermore, episode 10 introduced a religious redemptive arc, depicting Dahmer seeking forgiveness, undergoing baptism (see Figure 8), and engaging in theological discussions with a prison pastor. Moreover, in episode 4, Dahmer's remorse was also dramatized when he was shown attempting CPR on Tuomi, indicating he did not intend to kill him (see Figure 9). These examples show how the theme of remorse was incorporated into both formats, but in different ways—the documentary's use of audio testimony and archival recordings, while the series' use of scripted dialogue, dramatized behavior, and symbolic religious imagery. This implies that the dramatized format might enable a more redemptive or emotionally engaging portrayal that may influence viewers' perceptions of Dahmer as a complicated, morally flawed person rather than just a murderer.



**Figure 8.** Screenshot taken from the dramatized series (episode 10)



**Figure 9.** Screenshot taken from the dramatized series (episode 4)

### *Humanization*

Dahmer's relationships with other people were used in both formats to portray him as having the capacity for emotional complexity, transformation, and vulnerability. In the documentary, Wendy, his attorney, was a key humanizing character. Her narration softened his image by providing a very personal viewpoint. In episode 1, she was shown describing her relationship with Dahmer in layered emotional terms: "There were times that I felt like a mother to him. There were times that I felt like... like he was my brother. There were times that I felt like he... I was his therapist" (CK-ep1). In addition to highlighting Dahmer's alleged emotional dependence, this portrayal presented him as someone who should be treated with kindness and compassion. Moreover, in episode 3, journalist Jeff Fleming was shown commenting on how Wendy's presence served a strategic purpose in court: "Wendy Patrickus played a prominent role to soften Jeffrey Dahmer's image. Having a young woman sitting there made Jeffrey Dahmer



look a little less threatening" (CK-ep3). Additionally, this theme was subtly reinforced by visual cues, such as the documentary's use of childhood photos, as seen in Figure 10. Perhaps in an attempt to arouse pity, these pictures portrayed Dahmer as a helpless child, making it difficult for viewers to reconcile that image with the serial killer he eventually became.



*Figure 10. Screenshots taken from the documentary (episodes 1 and 2)*

However, in the dramatized series, the most significant example of humanization through relationships was the portrayal of Dahmer's connection with Tony Hughes, one of his victims. Hughes was the primary focus of episode 6, which showed a strong emotional connection between the two men that is not shown in the documentary. Dahmer was portrayed as changing—he quit drinking, kept his house clean, was content, and refrained from killing—implying that real love is possible and that change is possible (see Figure 11). This softer, more emotionally nuanced portrayal was further supported by the episode's tone, visual aesthetic, and narrative pacing, which contrasted sharply with the rest of the series.



*Figure 11. Screenshot taken from the dramatized series (episode 6)*



These portrayals led approximately 20 viewers of the dramatized series, in particular, to reflect on their own sympathetic or emotional responses. Audiences indicated that the show elicited feelings of pity or understanding for Dahmer. For example: "With this series, I found myself feeling a little sorry for Dahmer, as it delves into his life & background." (45M); "While Dahmer's actions were undoubtedly terrible... he wasn't really a bad person, just sick." (63M); "You know this guy does evil and sick stuff, but you feel bad for him." (136M). The reactions of the viewers reveal that the dramatized series was more successful than the documentary in arousing empathy, even for a person as evil as Dahmer. Although the documentary featured some humanizing moments, such as Wendy's multi-layered emotional reflections and pictures from Dahmer's early years, these had less of an impact on viewers. On the other hand, the dramatized series highlighted Dahmer's vulnerability and romantic potential by allowing for a more intense emotional experience, particularly through the fictionalized relationship with Tony Hughes. However, it is important to note that the number of viewer comments for the dramatized series was considerably higher than for the documentary, which may have amplified this perceived difference in emotional engagement. This contrast demonstrates how, in ways that documentary formats might not be able to fully accomplish, dramatization can influence viewer empathy through more implicit, subtle cues such as tone, visual aesthetics, pacing, etc., rather than direct words from people, which might leave more space for the viewers' interpretive activity to come in.

### *Victims as plot devices*

The centering of Dahmer's relationships often came at the expense of victim representation, particularly in the dramatized series. Here, while Dahmer was given emotional depth, most victims were minimally developed, lacking meaningful backstories, personality, or context beyond their roles in his crimes. Despite the one exception mentioned above, this lack of ethical representation of victims was something reviewers were particularly critical of. Audiences shared:

"... the overall undertaking was disrespectful to the victims." (61M)

"Exploiting the trauma and tragedies of real people in order to sell torture porn to the people fascinated with true-crime. Terrible series that shouldn't exist" (76M)

“I read it was based on the victims of Dahmer, no it is not! It is based on the victims final, terrifying moments. No real backstory on the victims.” (163M)

“The victims, with maybe one exception, are only defined by their dreadful deaths. The killing of a 14 y o kid becomes a device to move the plot forward. A kid who ... is just defined by his encounter with Dahmer.” (197M)

Thus, some audiences critically assess the strong focus on the killer as the central protagonist—an especially striking response given that both shows were explicitly framed around him from the outset, as seen in their titles. Viewers not only question how his story is told but also challenge the broader conventions of the true crime genre, which often sensationalize violence while sidelining the victims and those most affected by the crimes. This is consistent with Chauhan et al. (2024), who argue that true crime documentaries frequently prioritize the killer's story over the victims' suffering, resulting in ethically complex portrayals that straddle the line between documentation and exploitation. Even audience reactions, as demonstrated in Trisler's (2021) study of *Making a Murderer*, reflect dissatisfaction with how true crime content dramatizes violence while minimizing its impact on victims and communities.

## 5. Conclusion

In an era where true crime media significantly influences our culture, it is essential to understand the portrayal of serial killers and the public's response to this content.

Representations of figures like Jeffrey Dahmer extend beyond mere entertainment; they shape public dialogue concerning justice, deviance, and the essence of humanity. This study analyzed the variations in the depiction of the serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer across diverse media formats and the audience reception of these portrayals as reflected in online reviews. By examining a documentary (*Conversations with a Killer*) and a dramatized series (*Monster*), along with audience reviews on Rotten Tomatoes, it demonstrated how media format influences the portrayal of serial killers and the interpretation of these representations by viewers.

The analysis revealed that media representation significantly influences public perception and discourse regarding serial killers. This is due to its impact on aesthetic selections, narrative techniques, and the ethical and emotional context of the subject. In both formats, depictions of Dahmer were multifaceted and inconsistent, and audience reactions indicated that individuals were actively engaged with these representations, frequently in a critical manner. The findings suggest that the core mechanisms of variation lie in the distinct affordances of each format: documentaries generally anchor interpretation in factual discourse and expert authority, while dramatizations promote emotional engagement and moral ambiguity. These distinctions promote diverse audience interpretations, ranging from critical analysis to emotional engagement.

### Main research findings

Returning to the research question—how does the portrayal of a serial killer vary across different media formats, and how are these portrayals received by audiences engaged in online reviewing?—the analysis revealed five interrelated themes that together show how audience interpretation and media formats influence the cultural significance of serial killers like Jeffrey Dahmer. The first was the representation of the serial killer as a multifaceted individual. Second, the serial killer was portrayed as a product of social institutions. The third was presenting the serial killer as a monster. The fourth theme was the serial killer's aesthetic construction. Finally was the serial killer's growth via his relationships with others. So, how do these themes illustrate varying representations of a serial killer in media formats and the audiences' perceptions?

In contrast to the dominant narrative in earlier studies that tended to classify serial killers into rigid, fixed archetypes—such as the monster or celebrity (e.g., Jimenez, 2023; Wiest, 2016; Das, 2022)—the serial killer was portrayed as a complex character in both the dramatized series and the documentary. Both media formats provided contradictory framings, even within a single episode, in which Dahmer was portrayed as manipulative, emotionally distant, psychologically unstable, remorseful, and occasionally pitiful. This dynamic representation, which reflects what Connelly (2010) referred to as the convergence of entertainment and crime commodification, complicates earlier work by offering simultaneous and conflicting frames. Furthermore, the audience's reactions revealed a high degree of metareflection—reviewers were not just passive recipients; instead, they frequently observed and offered commentary on these shifts in representation. Some appreciated the intricacy and argued that emotional contradiction was appropriate for a character with such moral ambiguity. In contrast, others expressed concern about how easily narrative structure or artistic devices could arouse sympathy. This supports Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, as viewers actively resisted prevailing framings and raised ethical issues through negotiated or oppositional readings. Audiences shifted from being passive recipients to co-constructors of meaning, highlighting the growing significance of participatory culture in media interpretation (Jenkins, 2006).

Another central theme was the framing of Dahmer as a product of social institutions. Both media formats emphasized systemic issues that contributed to Dahmer's prolonged criminal activity, such as institutional racism, police negligence, and familial dysfunction. The way these issues were presented, however, varied considerably between the two formats. While the dramatized series used dialogue and dramatization to make these structural critiques more explicit and emotionally charged, the documentary approached these topics through interviews and archival material, embedding them more subtly in expert discourse. The audience's responses reflected this divide, with some praising the dramatized series' social critique and others accusing it of politicizing crime or defending Dahmer. These results build on previous research (e.g., Trisler, 2021; Gaynor, 2023) by showing that true crime viewers engage in ethical evaluation and that various formats invite different forms of moral scrutiny. This suggests that format-specific narrative strategies influence interpretive possibilities.

Despite moments of humanization, the persistent construction of Dahmer as a "monster" endured across formats. The documentary constructed this image through the use of psychiatric

labels (such as "borderline personality disorder"), visual cues (such as crime scene shots), and language (such as "maniac" or "predator"). In contrast, this image was constructed in the dramatized series through raw, graphic imagery that focused more directly on Dahmer and his actions (e.g., scenes depicting Dahmer consuming human flesh or drinking human blood). The monster archetype has been established as a dominant trope in previous literature (Wiest, 2016; Pace, 2019). However, this study adds nuance by demonstrating how it coexists with empathetic portrayals, frequently causing viewers to experience cognitive dissonance. While some audience members criticized the lack of moral clarity it produced—again pointing to complex, negotiated decodings rather than passive reception—others praised the horror-infused aesthetic. The aestheticization of Dahmer's character was particularly evident in the dramatized series, with pacing, cinematography, and casting decisions all working together to create a stylized and emotionally compelling portrayal. Although the audience's opposition, particularly to the perceived glamorization, suggests a shift in cultural expectations, this aligns with Jarvis's (2007) concept of the serial killer as a cultural icon.

Lastly, Dahmer's portrayal was shaped by interpersonal relationships. In the documentary, Dahmer's attorney, Wendy, played a pivotal role in humanizing him, and Dahmer's recordings helped demonstrate that he was capable of genuine remorse. In general, the documentary extensively used first-person narratives. On the other hand, in order to humanize him, the dramatized series highlighted his relationship with his father and depicted an emotionally close relationship with Tony Hughes, one of his victims. Some viewers, however, felt that these emotional arcs diverted attention from the victims or reduced them to narrative devices, leading them to criticize this narrative strategy on ethical grounds. This supports existing concerns in the literature about the marginalization of victims in true crime media (Chauhan et al., 2024) while also adding a new dimension by showing how audiences actively critique such representational imbalances. Overall, by illustrating how serial killer representations are dynamic, format-dependent, and open to viewer interpretation, this study both confirms and expands on prior research.

## **Reflections on the research**

One of the most surprising findings among the results was that, despite obvious narrative and stylistic distinctions between the documentary and the dramatized series, the serial killer was

portrayed similarly in both. Whether framed as a monster, a misunderstood victim, or a symbol of institutional failure, the core narrative arcs largely overlapped. This was somewhat unexpected and shows that the "what" of serial killer representation—who Dahmer is portrayed as—remains culturally consistent across formats. What differs is the "how"—the methods, tone, and emotional framing used. This illustrates the enduring power of cultural narratives about evil and justice and may be a reflection of larger cultural constraints in true crime storytelling, where specific archetypes are recycled regardless of format.

These findings have several theoretical implications. It first reaffirms the relevance of Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model in today's media environment. The study has shown that meaning is not fixed by the text itself but is actively negotiated by viewers, who draw on their own moral frameworks to accept, challenge, or reject the messages they encounter. This research also pushes Hall's model further by illustrating the relationship between media format and decoding. While both formats provided similar character constructions, the dramatized series, with its stylized aesthetics and emotional immersion, more often evoked moral concern from viewers. On the other hand, some viewers were more receptive to the documentary's framing because of the legitimacy it conveyed through the use of expert interviews and archival material. This study, therefore, builds upon Hall's model by arguing that, even before interpretation begins, both format and narrative form shape the range of possible interpretations.

The findings also cast doubt on Murley's (2008) claim that, by allowing for intense character engagement, serialized storytelling inherently increases empathy for violent offenders. While that pattern was evident, particularly in the dramatized series, audiences were not all sympathetic, with many actually rebelling against what they saw as unethical or manipulative humanization. This highlights a conflict: while character-driven, serialized storytelling can raise affective investment, viewers are becoming more aware of how that empathy is created and are prepared to question it in today's media landscape.

The audience's active engagement further refines existing claims about the glamorization of serial killers (e.g., Jimenez, 2023). While prior scholarship suggested that attractive actors and stylized visuals lead to romanticization, this study found a more resistant viewer response. Evan Peters' casting was criticized by many as being exploitative or improper, underscoring the growing unease with emotional manipulation and aestheticized violence. This implies that glamorization is a negotiation that audiences frequently oppose rather than a certain result of

stylistic decisions. This research also contributes original insights through its cross-format approach. Unlike much prior work, which focused on a single case or genre, this study directly compared portrayals of the same killer in two distinct formats. It showcased the various narrative tools employed by each format: the dramatized series relied on emotional depth, symbolic cinematography, and interpersonal drama; the documentary utilized expert commentary and interviews to create an institutional lens. Audiences' perceptions and reactions to Dahmer were influenced by these format-specific tactics, with dramatization eliciting more polarized reactions that ranged from reluctant empathy to strong moral condemnation.

Audience discourse itself provided a rich site of analysis. Reviewers did not merely comment on aesthetics or performance; many engaged in sophisticated moral and ethical evaluations, questioning how trauma was represented, whether the show respected victims, and whether certain choices crossed ethical lines. This builds on research such as Fathallah (2022) by showing how viewers are not only decoding messages but also holding content creators publicly accountable for their decisions. By doing this, the audience also contributes to the change in emphasis from the serial killer to the victims. Almost 50 reviews expressed discomfort with the way the stories in both formats focused on Dahmer's emotional life while treating his victims like mere plot points. Previous literature, which frequently concentrates on the killer's characterization, has mostly lacked this victim-centered critique. It suggests a more critical and socially conscious way of consuming media, marking a shift in viewer expectations and ethical frameworks.

In conclusion, the way that serial killers are portrayed is influenced by a combination of media format, cultural archetypes, and audiences who are becoming more involved, rather than just sensationalism or aesthetic style. While the narrative tools vary by format (for example, the documentary uses interviews to follow an institutional and systemic lens, while the dramatized series uses stylized scenes to follow an emotional and aesthetic lens), the character constructions themselves frequently stay remarkably consistent, providing a nuanced answer to the research question: how does the portrayal of a serial killer vary across different media formats, and how are these portrayals received by audiences engaged in online reviewing? The media, however, does not determine the meaning of those portrayals; rather, audience participation co-produces it. Responses from viewers varied from acceptance to outright rejection, frequently demonstrating a high degree of moral consciousness and critical thought. This implies that audiences in the

digital age are ethically active contributors to the formation of cultural memory and the conversation surrounding crime and justice rather than passive consumers. As viewers are as important to meaning-making as the media texts themselves, true crime media functions within a dynamic cultural feedback loop rather than operating in a vacuum.

### **Limitations and suggestions for future research**

Even though this study offered valuable insights into the public's reactions and the representation of serial killers in different media formats, it also had certain limitations. First, the analysis was limited to two specific case studies that both involved the same individual: *Conversations with a Killer: The Jeffrey Dahmer Tapes* and *Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story*. Although a thorough cross-format comparison was made possible, this limits the applicability of the findings to depictions of other serial killers or different story settings. Furthermore, the audience reception data were obtained exclusively from Rotten Tomatoes reviews, which, while rich in qualitative information, may not adequately represent the range of viewer opinions, especially from audiences that are less likely to participate in online reviews or those who use other platforms, such as YouTube, Reddit, or Twitter. Moreover, the varying amounts of comments between the two media formats were also a limitation, as the dramatized series had significantly more comments than the documentary. Additionally, the study's primary focus on data in English and Spanish may limit the applicability of its conclusions in multilingual or non-Anglophone contexts where cultural perceptions of crime, justice, and morality may vary.

A larger sample of serial killer representations across diverse genres and cultural contexts, such as international documentaries, fiction, or podcasts, could be examined in future studies to identify any emerging trends. A more complete understanding of how audience interpretations are impacted by gender, notoriety, and media visibility would also be possible by looking at how female serial killers are portrayed or less well-known cases. Furthermore, interviewing audiences or holding focus groups could yield a more detailed understanding of how people perceive and react to true crime content on an emotional level. This method would enable researchers to investigate how viewers' own social positioning, backgrounds, and life experiences may influence their individual assessments. Lastly, since online reviews were used in this study, future research should consider how they might overrepresent firmly held or polarized viewpoints and fail to fully capture the range of audience reactions. Another fruitful



direction would be to investigate the moral dilemmas that arise when creating content about serial killers. How do content creators strike a balance between storytelling and sensitivity, and how do they justify decisions that might cause retraumatization or glamorization? Future studies may also examine the standards, models, or creative methods that producers can employ to strike the right balance between respecting victims, ensuring public accountability, and achieving narrative impact, as well as what constitutes ethical or responsible true crime content production. Lastly, researchers could examine how audience engagement evolves over time, particularly in conjunction with viral true crime content or trending cases, and how platform-specific cultures mediate various forms of participatory critique (e.g., Reddit discussions versus TikTok fandoms). By broadening the methodological and cultural scope, future research can build on the foundation established here to investigate the dynamic relationship between media representations of crime and the diverse ways audiences interpret them.

These results also have broader societal implications. There is a need for more morally conscious storytelling techniques in the true crime genre due to the tendency to focus on the murderer, often at the expense of the victims' stories. This research can help guide conversations about media ethics, content regulation, and production accountability by reflecting on how media representations can unintentionally glamorize offenders and marginalize victims. When handling delicate, real-life tragedies, platforms and content producers may find it helpful to consider how their framing decisions impact public empathy and memory. The study's findings may help create more balanced strategies that prioritize victim dignity and steer clear of sensationalism, encouraging media organizations to adopt more socially conscious crime narrative models.

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## Appendix A: Dataset General Information

This appendix provides a summary of the general information about the episodes-portion of the dataset used for the content analysis. It includes details such as episode titles, plot summaries, and durations from both the documentary and the dramatized series.

### **Documentary** Conversations with a killer: The Jeffrey Dahmer Tapes (by: Joe Berlinger)

Episode #	Title	Plot (cited from Netflix)	Duration
1	Sympathy for the Devil	Attorneys, experts and journalists recall Jeffrey Dahmer's 1991 arrest and trace the beginnings of the horrifying murders he ultimately confessed to.	58m
2	Can I Take Your Picture?	In the late 1980s, Dahmer develops a pattern of targeting victims in Milwaukee's gay bars while hiding his impulses from the people around him.	62m
3	Evil or Insane?	Dahmer's trial raises controversial questions about law enforcement and justice. Today, the repercussions of the murders he committed still reverberates.	60m


### **Dramatized series** Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story (by: Ryan Murphy, Ian Brennan)


Episode #	Title	Plot (cited from Netflix)	Duration
1	Episode One	After throwing his neighbor off the stench coming from his apartment, Jeff heads to a local bar, where a stranger takes him up on a tempting offer.	49m
2	Please Don't Go	A young Jeff contends with troubles at home and school. Years later, his strange behavior evolves into murderous deeds that slip past the police.	52m
3	Doin' A Dahmer	Left to live alone after his parents' turbulent divorce, high school senior Jeff breaks routine when he invites a hitchhiker into his home.	53m
4	The Good Boy Box	From high school to the Army, Jeff struggles to find stability. While living in his grandmother's house, Jeff begins targeting young men at gay bars.	63m


5	Blood On Their Hands	Jeff's list of victims grows longer without a full police investigation. An encounter with a teen lands him in jail. Later, he gets his own apartment.	60m
6	Silenced	Aspiring model Tony moves to Madison and meets Jeff at a bar, beginning a relationship through handwritten notes that takes a dark turn.	55m
7	Cassandra	A prominent activist meets with Glenda, who recounts her harrowing experiences living next door to Jeff and how her concerns went largely ignored.	45m
8	Lionel	As Jeff awaits trial, his father deals with his own demons, the Milwaukee police try to save face and the victims' families share their stories.	48m
9	The Bogeyman	Glenda, the victims and their families do their best to move forward despite haunting memories, while Jeff attracts fanfare from behind bars.	49m
10	God of Forgiveness, God of Vengeance	In prison, Jeff's newfound fame makes him a target. His parents seek closure and Glenda pushes for a memorial on familiar grounds to honor the victims.	55m

## Appendix B: Codebook

This appendix presents the codebook used for the content analysis, including definitions of categories, coding rules, and examples to guide consistent data interpretation across episodes. This codebook contains codes that were used to analyze both media formats (documentary and dramatized series) and the audience's comments.

Data	Code	Frequency	Definition	Example
<b>Media Portrayal of Jeffrey Dahmer</b>				
<b>Storytelling techniques</b>	Flashbacks	(6)	Scenes depicting past events to provide context / perhaps evoke empathy	
	POV Narratives	(4)	Use of different perspectives to tell a story	In the documentary: use of testimonies of victims' families, law enforcement (e.g. detectives), the killer  In the dramatized series: killer's POV, neighbor's POV, killer's father POV
	Voiceovers & interviews	(1)	Use of narration or firsthand accounts to structure the story	
<b>Music &amp; sound design</b>	Music & sound design	(26)	Use of music	
	<i>Subcodes:</i> Suspenseful/eerie	(16)	Use of suspenseful or eerie music	
	Cheerful	(10)	Use of cheerful music	
<b>Visual aesthetics</b>	Shots	(5)	Different types of shots used, depending on the scene and the intent	Close-ups for emotional impact, wide shots for detachment
	Props	(37)	Depictions of objects used to enhance the story	Crime scene photos, newspaper clippings, evidence photos
	<i>Subcodes:</i> Evidence	(20)	Use of evidence	

	Photos	(17)	Use of photos	
<b>Killer archetypes</b>	Monster / villain	(39)	Emphasis on the brutality of crimes	<p><i>"He became like a killing machine who was totally out of control."</i></p> <p><i>"(...) it wasn't just having sex with a corpse, but it was opening the viscera of the body and (...)"</i></p>
	Victim of circumstance	(72)	Depiction of Dahmer as a product of his environment	
	<b>Subcodes:</b> Childhood	(22)	Mentions of things that happened during Dahmer's childhood	<i>"The one thing that Jeffrey did tell me (...) was this, uh, constant bickering between his parents (...)."</i>
	Loner	(13)	Mentions of Dahmer being a loner	<p><i>"As he got older, Jeffrey became walled up emotionally from his peers, teachers (...)"</i></p> <p><i>"[Jeffrey] No. Don't leave. Why does everybody always wanna leave me?"</i></p>
	Social context (racism)	(18)	Mentions of things that happened that involve racism	<i>"If the victims had been white and straight, the search would have been more in-depth, more specific."</i>
	System failure	(30)	Mentions of things that the police did wrong during the time of Dahmer's killings	<p><i>"The police didn't listen to those girls."</i></p> <p><i>"There's a real question as to whether the police department sufficiently followed up on those missing people."</i></p>
	Tragic figure	(22)	Presentation of Dahmer with some redeeming qualities	
	<b>Subcodes:</b> Substance abuse	(22)	Mentions of Dahmer's drinking	<i>"[Jeffrey] Dad, I'm okay. [Lionel] No, Jeff, you're not okay. You've been drinking. I saw the empty cans and I smell it on you. You're not okay."</i>

	Celebrity	(19)	Presentation of Dahmer as a celebrity	<i>"[sister] 'Dahmer vs. Jesus'? Is this for real? [Shirley] It's the newest issue in his Jeffrey Dahmer series. [sister] Just when you thought folks couldn't stoop any lower. It's sick. It's like they're making him into a superhero. Freedom of speech, my ass."</i>
	Cultural icon	(14)	Presentation of Dahmer as a cultural icon	
<b>Character traits</b>	Positive	(38)	Mentions of positive aspects	
	<b>Subcodes:</b> Character	(18)	Mentions of positive character traits	<i>"He was very polite" "[Bass] Jeff became more than just the neighbor across the hall. I liked him because I felt that he had a soft heart."</i>
	Physical appearance	(5)	Mentions of Dahmer's physical appearance	<i>"[Bass] And I took a liking to him because he looked so clean-cut. He looked so mild. He looked like a young Clark Kent." "[Anne] We were expecting like, you know, maybe Charles Manson, but Dahmer was a good-looking man. He was subdued. He... didn't look like a serial killer."</i>
	Remorse / feeling bad	(17)	Mentions of Dahmer feeling remorse or feeling bad	<i>"[Jeffrey] I really made a sincere effort to change the way I was living, to change my desires." "[Jeffrey] For what I did I should be dead."</i>
	Negative	(65)	Mentions of negative aspects	
	<b>Subcodes:</b> Character	(12)	Mentions of negative character traits	<i>"Jeffrey was guarded, angry and uncooperative from the start (...)"</i>

	Lack of remorse	(4)	Mentions of Dahmer not feeling remorse	<i>"His personality pattern was of an individual who uses people, sees them as objects (...)"</i>
	Lack of responsibility	(9)	Mentions of Dahmer not being in control or responsible for what happened	<i>"[Jeffrey] It always started with fantasizing, and then the fantasies came to be."</i>
	Loneliness	(18)	Mentions of Dahmer being lonely	<i>"[Wendy] His wanting to have a companion but not wanting them to leave was very big. It was very powerful for him."</i>
	Manipulativeness	(14)	Mentions of Dahmer being manipulative	<i>"[Wendy] Jeffrey always had a quick response. It seemed kind of natural to him to have that ability to manipulate and get himself out of bad situations."</i>
	Mental illness	(11)	Mentions of Dahmer being mentally ill	<i>"[McCann] (...) this was not an evil man. This was a sick man."</i> <i>"[Dr. Berlin] (...) How many people does someone have to eat in Milwaukee before they think you have a mental disease?"</i>
<b>Loaded terminology</b>	Extreme language	(18)	Use of words like "monster", "evil", "psychopath"	<i>"[Fleming] He was a cannibal. He was a serial killer."</i> <i>"[reporter] (...) the biggest and most gruesome mass murder case in Milwaukee history."</i>
	Humanizing terms	(48)	References portraying Dahmer as misunderstood	<i>"[Wendy] My relationship with Jeff grew over time. As we went on, I got to know different facets of him (...)"</i> <i>"[Boyle] There's no person I've ever known that was as lonely a human being as Jeffrey Dahmer (...)"</i>
	Sensationalism	(15)	References glamorizing, iconizing, idolizing, making it so	<i>"[Jentzen] (...) I have come to believe that</i>



			much bigger, etc.	<i>that is a time that I actually encountered evil. And I can't describe it, but it is a feeling of human depravity.</i>
<b>Victim portrayal</b>	Emphasis on victim's stories	(26)	Screen time and focus given to victims	<i>"[Ross] Ernest Miller; another young man. Ernest had a good soul. He was very creative (...)"</i>
	Minimization of victims	(19)	Focus remains on Dahmer instead of victims and the victim's suffering primarily serves to advance Dahmer's story	<i>"[Dr. Dietz] (...) Dahmer, while living at his grandma's house, went out, and he met James Doxtator, who was 14 (...)"</i>
<b>Audience reception</b>				
<b>Emotional reactions</b>	Shock / disgust	(17)	E.g. Expressions of horror or revulsion	<i>"Practically unbearable" "(...) it just felt kind of gross and disturbing"</i>
	Fascination	(5)	Attraction to Dahmer's character or actions	<i>"Very interesting for someone with a morbid curiosity"</i>
	Sympathy	(8)	Comments suggesting understanding or pity for Dahmer	
	<b>Subcodes:</b> Sympathizing	(6)	Comments suggesting sympathy for Dahmer	<i>"(...) I found myself feeling a little sorry for Dahmer (...)"</i> <i>"(...) you know this guy does evil and sick stuff but you feel bad for him (...)"</i>
	Humanizing	(2)	Comments suggesting that Dahmer was humanized	<i>"This series will help you relate and sympathize for everyone involved. You can see the human side of Dahmer and what drove him to commit his horrendous acts. (...)"</i>
	Informative	(5)	Viewers expressing that the content was entertaining, informative, engaging, etc.	<i>"(...) I think it help us to understand that the information is key to help people with mental illness and taboos have not a place in this modern world anymore."</i>

<b>Moral judgments</b>	Criticism	(72)		
	<b>Subcodes:</b> Existence of the show	(8)	Viewers condemning the need to make the show	<i>"(...) has no real justification for its own existence." "(...) the question of how necessary another portrayal of the serial killer is still remains, especially one so precise."</i>
	Exploitation (victims)	(25)	Viewers condemning exploitation of victims	<i>"(...) But the execution was just terrible and cruel to the families of Dahmer's victims (...) "</i>
	Glamorization	(14)	Viewers condemning the glamorization of Dahmer	<i>"(...) he was shown in more of a positive light, instead of the dangerous predator that he was. I think there is a fine line between glamorising and boosting serial killers egos &amp; telling the story to keep the victims memories and deaths alive - for me this crossed that line a little."</i>
	Narrative manipulation	(14)	Viewers condemning inaccuracy	<i>"(...) it twists the satanic behavior of a mutant and uses it as a referendum on racial relations in society (...) "</i>
	Audience approval	(50)	Viewers praising the series	<i>"(...) does an admirable job of trying to tell this story (...) " "This show does a good job at presenting the twisted character of its namesake while also giving us the perspective of the victims and their loved ones."</i>
<b>Aesthetics &amp; authenticity</b>	Accuracy of events	(27)	Comments on historical or factual faithfulness	
	<b>Subcodes:</b> Accurate	(14)	Comments about accuracy	<i>"(...) unnervingly precise in re-creating Dahmer's history (...) "</i>
	Inaccurate	(13)	Comments about inaccuracy	<i>"(...) Netflix does not</i>

			<i>care, creating fiction out of reality by stretching the facts and designing the story to fit their priorities (...)</i>
Acting performance	(87)	Evaluations of actors' performance	<i>"(...) Evan Peters does an incredible (and disturbingly accurate) job as Dahmer, giving a chilling and emotionally charged performance (...)"</i>
Cinematography	(67)	Reviews discussing visual style and storytelling effectiveness	
<b>Subcodes:</b> Critique	(22)	Reviewers critiquing visual style and storytelling effectiveness	<i>"(...) The end result is just too slow and too uncomfortable and is not worth (...)"</i>
Praise	(45)	Reviewers praising visual style and storytelling effectiveness	<i>"(...) script is well-written, the cinematography is beautiful and all the acting here is top-notch (...)"</i>

## **Declaration Page: Use of Generative AI Tools in Thesis**

### **Student Information**

Name: Denise Martin

Student ID: 559719

Course Name: Master Thesis CM5000

Supervisor Name: Mariana Fried

Date: 20-06-2025

**Declaration:** I declare that I have used Generative AI Tools in the creation of this thesis. The tools used were: firstly, ChatGPT for the creation of the thesis title and the creation of several headings / subheadings of the thesis, and in an initial phase for the brainstorming of ideas for the theoretical framework and the themes that could be covered regarding my chosen subject; and secondly, Grammarly was used for writing improvements (such as grammar and spelling corrections) and implementing academic-style writing.

### **Acknowledgment of Generative AI Tools**

I acknowledge that I am aware of the existence and functionality of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, which are capable of producing content such as text, images, and other creative works autonomously.

GenAI use would include, but not limited to:

Generated content (e.g., ChatGPT, Quillbot) limited strictly to content that is not assessed (e.g., thesis title).

Writing improvements, including grammar and spelling corrections (e.g., Grammarly)

Language translation (e.g., DeepL), without generative AI alterations/improvements.

Research task assistance (e.g., finding survey scales, qualitative coding verification, debugging code)

Using GenAI as a search engine tool to find academic articles or books (e.g.,

☐ I declare that I have used generative AI tools, specifically ChatGPT and Grammarly, in the process of creating parts or components of my thesis. The purpose of using these tools was to aid in generating content or assisting with specific aspects of thesis work.

#### **Extent of AI Usage**

☐ I confirm that while I utilized generative AI tools to aid in content creation, the majority of the intellectual effort, creative input, and decision-making involved in completing the thesis were undertaken by me. I have enclosed the prompts/logging of the GenAI tool use in an appendix.

#### **Ethical and Academic Integrity**

☐ I understand the ethical implications and academic integrity concerns related to the use of AI tools in coursework. I assure that the AI-generated content was used responsibly, and any content derived from these tools has been appropriately cited and attributed according to the guidelines provided by the instructor and the course. I have taken necessary steps to distinguish between my original work and the AI-generated contributions. Any direct quotations, paraphrased content, or other forms of AI-generated material have been properly referenced in accordance with academic conventions.

By signing this declaration, I affirm that this declaration is accurate and truthful. I take full responsibility for the integrity of my assignment and am prepared to discuss and explain the role of generative AI tools in my creative process if required by the instructor or the Examination Board. I further affirm that I have used generative AI tools in accordance with ethical standards and academic integrity expectations.

Signature: Denise Martin

Date of Signature: 27-06-2025

☐ I declare that I have NOT used any generative AI tools and that the assignment concerned is my original work.

Signature: [digital signature]

Date of Signature: [Date of Submission]