

SERIALIZED KILLING: USABILITY AND USER EXPERIENCE IN THE TRUE CRIME

GENRE

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE

MASTER OF ARTS

BY

CATHERINE M. TRAYLOR

DR. KEVIN T. MOLONEY – ADVISOR

BALL STATE UNIVERSITY

MUNCIE, INDIANA

JULY 2019

Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank my thesis advisor Dr. Kevin Moloney, who consistently allowed this paper to be my own work while steering me in the right direction, providing a fresh perspective, and patiently responding to a multitude of emails. I would also like to acknowledge my committee members Dr. Jennifer Palilonis and Dr. Kristen McCauliff. I am grateful to them for their valuable comments on my work and support throughout the process. My deep appreciation goes to my survey respondents and focus group participants for their candid responses and willingness to give of their time. Special thanks to my parents, who always made education a priority in our home and a possibility in my life. Finally, thank you to Zach McFarland for enduring countless nights of thesis edits and reworks. Your patience and encouragement did not go unnoticed.

Abstract

THESIS: Serialized Killing: Usability and User Experience in the True Crime Genre

STUDENT: Catherine M. Traylor

DEGREE: Master of Arts

COLLEGE: College of Communication, Information and Media

DATE: July 2019

PAGES: 31

True crime, a genre that has piqued the interest of individuals for decades, has taken on a new form in the age of digital media. Through television shows, podcasts, books, and community-driven online forums, investigations of the coldest of cases are met with newfound enthusiasm and determination from professional storytellers and armchair detectives alike. This study uses a multi-method approach that includes surveys, focus groups, and design thinking sessions to explore the varied elements of storytelling across four platforms. It also identifies the preferred method of consumption by audiences. Respondents expressed a desire to engage with a detailed story on a convenient platform with visuals to aid in the retelling of the crime. This research connects the true crime genre to audience entertainment preferences by exploring the media platforms used in popular true crime documentaries, and how those forms affect immersion and engagement in the genre.

Keywords: true crime, women, storytelling, gender, media preference, engagement, immersion, podcast

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction	5
Chapter 2: Literature Review	11
True Crime	11
Women and true crime	13
Design Thinking	14
Chapter 3: Methodology	17
Participant solicitation and initial survey	17
Focus groups	18
Design Thinking	19
Data analysis	20
Chapter 4: Results	21
Participant Background and Survey Results	21
Focus Group Design Thinking Session Results	23
Documentary	23
Podcast	25
Engaging elements	28
Chapter 5: Discussion	30
Limitations and Future Work	33
Conclusion	35
References	37
Appendix A	40
Appendix B	42
Appendix C	43
Appendix D	44
Appendix E	45
Appendix F	46

Chapter 1: Introduction

America's Most Wanted hooked me as a child. I would stay up late into the night watching with my father its cold murder cases unfold on the TV screen. Although I always went to bed a little scared, I wanted more of this genre that tells hauntingly real stories of real people involved in violent and often gruesome crimes (true crime, n.d.). In college I took true crime with me on my long drives between school and home. Along with millions of others, I quickly became a *Serial* addict. Once that blockbuster podcast ended I expanded my horizons to *S-Town*, *Up and Vanished*, *My Favorite Murder*, and others. The genre keeps me looking over my shoulder and a little bit afraid of the dark, but I keep returning. And I am not alone in this. Women like me disproportionately consume true crime stories, and they overwhelmingly choose podcasts as their medium.

This thesis will use empathy research techniques to explore the storytelling affordances of the media used to publish true crime genre stories in 2019. It will explore what podcast technology offers this genre that other media does not, what elements of podcasting and other platforms are most appealing to audiences and whether Mayer's (2012) Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning applies to this case. This study draws specifically on a female audience due to its lopsided interest in the genre. That interest and the rise of podcast popularity are briefly examined to contextualize this choice of population and media. The use of design thinking reveals the reasons the participants in this study choose particular platforms to engage with the genre.

Between podcasts and docudramas, TV shows and novels, there is now more access to behind-the-scenes details, first-person accounts and courtroom proceedings than ever before. The coldest of cases have been met with newfound enthusiasm and determination from professional

storytellers and armchair detectives alike. While shows like *America's Most Wanted* and *48 Hours* have outlined true crimes for television audiences for decades, the rise of digital storytelling has turned the consumption of true crime from an interest to an obsession. Podcasts have been available since the mid-2000s, but the 2014 true crime blockbuster *Serial* made podcasts a household name (Lindgren, 2016). The series, by the creators of *This American Life*, documents in extreme and sometimes jarring detail the 1999 murder of Hae Min Lee, a Baltimore high school student. Listeners were brought along for the ride as journalist Sarah Koenig re-opened the decades-old story, exploring evidence piece by piece and making cold calls to witnesses. She even connected with Adnan Syed—the man serving a life sentence for the teen's murder. The podcast is the fastest ever to reach five million downloads. By December 23, 2014 it had been downloaded 40 million unique times (Roberts, 2014). The rapid growth and popularity of the weekly installments made podcasts a trendy medium and brought a formerly-taboo topic into the homes of people around the world. However, not only did *Serial* reignite the conversation around a particular case, it also reopened the door for true crime coverage to top the charts in popularity. *Serial* sparked true crime among audiences as a means of entertainment, provided a vessel to form community, and fueled an insatiable desire for more content. In a study of true crime podcasting that highlights *Serial*'s rise in prominence, Boling (2018) found that the predominantly-female true crime podcast audience reported three prominent motivations: entertainment, convenience, and boredom. Pair an audience's desire to be entertained with the compelling storytelling of Koenig, behind-the-scenes access to a brutal murder, and the ability to detach oneself from the gruesome story with the click of a button, and *Serial* quickly became a household name. Along with it, true crime by way of podcast became a global sensation.

However, modern-day true-crime storytelling doesn't live in podcasts alone. In fact, most stories now have retellings across a variety of platforms. *Atlanta Monster* (December 2017) is the true crime du jour, complete with a podcast, an online comment board, and the re-airing of old news segments highlighting the case. Before that, it was *Dirty John* (October 2017), which grabbed the attention of audiences with an unexpected twist to what should have been a simple murder. Even before that, it was *S-Town* (March 2017), which started as a podcast and was downloaded 16 million times in the first week of airing. Soon after, due to audience demand, the story grew into articles, magazine features, and community forums. Before them all, was *Up and Vanished* (August 2016)—the story studied in this thesis—which outlines a more traditional approach to true crime storytelling, featuring the cold case of a young, attractive missing woman who seemingly had no enemies. In addition to those blockbusters, episodic true crime podcasts and docudramas like *Criminal* (January 2014), *My Favorite Murder* (January 2016), *Making a Murderer* (December 2015), *The People vs. OJ Simpson* (February 2016), and others, are constantly producing content with entertainment value, and most importantly, compelling stories, subsequently keeping the true crime genre at top of mind for audiences (Goldberg, 2018). The ratings speak for themselves. *The People vs. OJ Simpson* averaged 7 million viewers per episode, *My Favorite Murder* boasts 19 million downloads per month, *Making a Murderer* has been awarded numerous accolades, including four Primetime Emmy Awards in 2016 alone, and *Criminal* has topped a number of entertainment “best of” lists (Edison Research, 2017).

Just because all of this true crime media exists and is consumed by the masses, does that mean the information is being retained in a meaningful way? Mayer's Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning (2012) suggests the answer to that question depends on two factors. According to Mayer, in order to fully retain and learn from a multimedia storytelling source,

both auditory and visual receptors of the human brain must be activated. Five things must happen in order for learning to occur and stick: 1) relevant words are selected from the text or narration; 2) relevant images are selected from the illustrations; 3) the selected words are organized into a coherent verbal representation; 4) the selected images are organized into a coherent pictorial representation; and finally 5) the pictorial and verbal representations are melded with prior knowledge of the topic to form informed thoughts and opinions (Mayer, 2012). Each channel of the mind must be activated in order to achieve steps one through five. One without the other is not as impactful as both, as Mayer notes when he explains “people learn more deeply from words and pictures than from words alone” (p. 47). Podcasts, however, are a strictly-auditory medium. This thesis will explore possible reasons why podcasts are overwhelmingly popular even though, according to Mayer (2012), multimedia platforms could provide a more informative experience.

Although true crime audiences are comprised of both men and women of all ages, research shows that females disproportionately flock to the genre as compared to their male counterparts, and in fact, females are more likely to choose the true crime genre over others when given an option (Marks, 2017). However, there has been little research done to determine why this is and what method of consumption is driving the audience. The research that has been done (Ali, 2017; Marks, 2017; Scott, 2003; Vicary, 2010) has landed on a combination of psychology, adrenaline, and natural instinct as the driving forces behind female interest in the genre. While statistically speaking, men are more likely to be murdered in general (Cooper, 2011), in most of the more disturbing crimes like rape and serial killings, women are often the primary targets (Scott, 2003). This is what is typically shown in the news and featured in true

crime narrative for the sake of entertainment, so although statistically women are less likely to be murdered than their male counterparts, the genre would lead one to believe otherwise.

As Bogart (2018) explains, one of the most curious aspects of true crime consumption is that most enthusiasts know what these true crime stories mean to families who have experienced the horror of these crimes in real life. They know true crime storytellers teeter the line of exploiting one person's tragedy for another's entertainment. They know the stories focus so extensively on the perpetrators that they tend to devalue the victims. Yet the masses—particularly women—can't help but tune in. Why might that be?

This study includes a survey designed to gather basic demographic information about participants and review their true crime consumption habits. Focus groups were employed to bring a subset of women together to engage with four types of media used to tell the same true crime story and explore the varying elements each platform offers. Finally, design thinking sessions were used to encourage interaction among participants and spark deeper conversation surrounding each platform. These tactics sought to answer two main research questions:

- RQ1: *Which platform did you most prefer and why?*
- RQ2: *Which elements of each platform fueled engagement most?*

The survey addressed the first question by providing a baseline for comparison. By knowing what audiences self-report as their most preferred platform, the potential shift in opinion during focus groups could be identified and explored. The second question was addressed by the focus group and subsequent design thinking session. Using design thinking strategies to further explore appealing elements of each platform shifted the conversation from an analysis of the story itself to an exploration of the medium used to convey the story, particularly limitations given the nature of certain platforms. It also allowed participants to compare their experiences to those of

others. This thesis applies these findings in an analysis of true crime storytelling platforms designed to better understand the appeal of the genre itself and identify audience consumption preference.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review explores three topics related to this project: true crime, women's consumption of the genre, and design thinking. Each topic is explored in relevance to the study's intent to uncover the elements of true crime storytelling across a variety of platforms that are most appealing to audiences.

True Crime

Before the details of each method of delivery can be explored, however, the appeal of the genre itself must be understood. Smith (2018) studied why people are so compelled by true crime, suggesting that perhaps it is simply a matter of accessibility—with the decade-long boom of true crime popularity paired with digital media growth there are outlets to consume true crime 24 hours a day, whether through books or blogs, podcasts or radio shows, television, or movies. However, an interview with A.J. Marsden, an assistant professor of human services and psychology at Beacon College in Leesburg, Florida, prompted Smith to begin exploring the premise that true crime is perhaps fascinating because it offers people a glimpse into the deviant parts of the human psyche. Noting fear as a driving force, Marsden explains that the only resolution to fear is an answer. Given that true crime falls so close to home in terms of relatability with victims, audiences often stay tuned because they want to understand the motivation behind the gruesome act, perhaps even rationalizing during the process a reason why it wouldn't happen to them. The fact that true crime is so accessible, as Smith noted, gives audiences an opportunity to engage with the stories from the safety of their own homes—an environment in which they know they're not likely facing any imminent danger. This allows audiences to dive as deep into a case as they would like with the option to back out into their comfort zone at any moment.

Bruzzi (2016) notes that since 2011 there has been a “veritable explosion in the number of trial and crime documentaries, across cinema, television and other screening platforms” (p. 249). Through a case study featuring an analysis of in-depth reviews and research on a handful of cases that have been broadcast for entertainment purposes, Bruzzi attempts to classify true crime as its own identifiable genre. Through this study, Bruzzi suggests that not only are audiences able to access true crime storytelling from virtually any platform at any time, they’re also exposed to much more detail than ever before. She examined the 2004 hit documentary *The Staircase*. The story is told in a ‘follow-the-subject’ documentary, which allowed viewers an opportunity to see parts of the story they’d never know otherwise: inside the subject’s home, behind the scenes during meetings between lawyers and clients, and testimonials from those closely involved with the case, to name a few. Although it avoided using fictional storytelling methods such as recreation or actor-based reenactment, *The Staircase*, she notes resonated with viewers because it relied heavily on the melodrama found within any courtroom and played up the already sensational and complex narrative associated with the case. For the first time, many viewers were exposed to the real, nitty gritty of a courtroom, with no holds barred. This alone is enough to compel an audience, but the first-of-its-kind production added a nearly unbelievable tale of love gone wrong. As the author notes, the crime itself and the surrounding inherent drama of a courtroom trial provides a dramatic, gripping narrative that doesn’t require embellishment or editing. Bruzzi suggests that avoiding fictionalized storytelling helped establish true crime as a genre. True crime, she says, has a unique relationship with its subjects, beyond what a typical documentary or story would (p. 266). As a regular consumer of true crime stories myself, I argue that tagging along through a complex murder case forges a sense of a complex relationship with the troubling subject or characters. In more traditional documentary, however, I find the focus is

on linear storytelling or audience education. Character development in traditional documentary is not as front and center as it is in the true crime genre. The complexities of true crime and the unknown variables of how the case will twist and turn throughout its investigation brings audiences along for a ride in a way traditional storytelling does not.

Aside from morbid curiosity, the most appealing part of true crime might be something humans can't control. Stahl (2017) notes that psychological factors like vulnerability, susceptibility and plausibility are key in terms of determining why true crime is so compelling. True crime podcasts make listeners worry that the crimes presented in the show could happen to anyone, themselves included, largely because the stories are grounded in facts. Add to that the psychological tendency of humans to construct scary visions based on their own deepest fears. Listeners become so engrossed in the story they believe it could happen to them at any moment. Stahl also notes that physiologically, the most primal and powerful instinct humans have is fear. Since true crime stories are so heinous and awful, a natural response to hearing the stories is fear. Since fear and adrenaline are linked, listeners feel an addictive rush of adrenaline. That cycle continues time and time again, leading to a desire to engage with the genre over and over.

Women and true crime

Although 80 percent of the nation's homicide victims are men (Bureau of Justice, 2008), female victims are predominantly featured on crime TV shows (Ali, 2017). Whether to get ratings or simply because the stories are most compelling, the disproportionate number of true crime series featuring female victims leads to the inaccurate notion that women are the number-one targets of random murder in the nation. While men are statistically more likely to be murdered in general, when women are victims someone they know is typically the perpetrator. According to the National Organization for Women's 2008 violence against women statistics, of

all the women murdered in the U.S., about one-third were killed by an intimate partner. Ali researched the disproportionate representation of female victims in true crime entertainment to their male counterparts and found that mental health experts and women's advocacy groups argue that crimes against women spark more outrage and attention.

However, not all authors believe the focus on female victims is one of good intent. As McKelvey wrote for the BBC (2013), the most publicized true crime cases feature white, middle class women attacked by a man. In reality, Morgan (2017) explains young women, low-income women and some minorities are disproportionately victims of domestic violence and rape. When we consider race, American-Indian women are victimized at a rate more than double that of women of other races (Morgan, 2017). Although the story lines do not accurately depict the reality of crime statistics among women, the retelling of a similar tale time and time again leads women of a particular demographic to grow interest in the genre by way of relating to the victims.

Design Thinking

The practice of design thinking is employed in this study as a method to engage participants and encourage communal discussion. Design thinking, while a flexible method, must follow certain steps in order to ensure valuable results. The first step of design thinking is defining a problem or challenge, followed by generating a multitude of ideas. These do not have to be well thought out or account for logistics, but getting the ball rolling is crucial. As Brown (2009) states, "The faster we make our ideas tangible, the sooner we will be able to evaluate them, refine them, and zero in on the best solution." Time and again, Brown stresses idea generation should happen early and often and continue happening in order to maintain relevance as the project is turned into something more. Brown asserts that opportunities are missed when

researchers do not look at an experience from all angles. Looking at an experience from start to finish, inside and out, does indeed complicate research, but it provides valuable insight into not only the experience itself but the user's interaction with the experience. Following the ideation of a multitude of ideas, creating and testing prototypes to work out the kinks occurs until a workable solution is found. From start to finish, Brown's explanation of design thinking takes a human-centered approach. He repeatedly states that stakeholders must be involved from the beginning of the process in order to make a project worthwhile in the end. In this study, the human-centered notion of design thinking was less about creating a tangible product in the end and more about the ideation phase and generating a multitude of thoughts on each storytelling platform's approach to true crime. The nature of design thinking provided participants an avenue to reflect on their experience from start to finish, eliciting both a meaningful emotional response to the stories as well as a dissection of the genre's storytelling tendencies.

While design thinking is traditionally used for the design of products and services, understanding the emotions that guide user behavior can also be applied in different ways (Bootcamp Bootleg, 2015). This is particularly evident in the telling of stories. A well-told story—focused on pertinent details that express surprising meaning and underlying emotions— affects the listeners' feelings and intellect simultaneously (Bootcamp Bootleg, 2015). The most critical part of successful design thinking as applicable to this study is the ability for researchers to empathetically connect with participants and encourage the sharing of their ideas. In order to understand the mindset of the women after engaging with each platform, the use of strategic design thinking allowed users to identify relevant thoughts and feelings. Subsequent group discussions provided an opportunity for observational research during which a researcher identified themes that arose from intriguing conversations with and among participants.

Gathering an array of individuals and carving out time for guided discussion is paramount to the success of the exercise. Brown (2009) says a successful focus group must gather people on both ends of the extremes together in order to enrich insight and inspiration. He also notes that during focus groups it is crucial for the facilitator to watch “what people don’t do, listening to what they don’t say” (p. 43). These works validate design thinking as both a problem-solving strategy and a vehicle by which to gather meaningful empirical evidence.

There is little research yet about how the storytelling affordances of true crime storytelling platforms contribute to the engagement of audience members. Most research focuses on the psychology of women’s interest in the genre as opposed to the most engaging elements of the stories and the role the delivery method plays in audience preference. However, the elements employed to tell the story play a key role in what audiences gravitate toward, and there is ample research in that field. Mayer’s Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning (2012) explains that in order for humans to fully process and retain information, there must be a marriage of auditory and visual components. The theory specifies five cognitive processes in multimedia learning: 1) selecting relevant words from the presented text or narration, 2) selecting relevant images from the presented illustrations, 3) organizing the selected words into a coherent verbal representation, 4) organizing selected images into a coherent pictorial representation, and 5) integrating the pictorial and verbal representations with prior knowledge of the topic. Memorable, impactful multimedia should be designed with these processes in mind. The true crime genre has infiltrated most platforms used to tell stories, but whether those platforms fully engage audiences based on Mayer’s findings is yet to be determined. The preferred elements of storytelling as reported by participants will serve as a barometer of the Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning as applied to the retelling of true crime stories.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This study used a survey, a focus group, and design thinking to determine what elements of true crime storytelling were most appealing to an audience of women. This study also explores whether the platform influences the effect of the story. The platforms included in this testing were a print book, a website, a podcast, and a documentary. Two key research questions were explored to determine the popularity of platforms, the effects of storytelling methods, and the elements most appealing to audiences:

- RQ1: *Which platform did you most prefer and why?*
- RQ2: *Which elements of each platform fueled engagement most?*

Participant solicitation and initial survey

A solicitation post was distributed in four true crime fan groups via Facebook, specifically targeting potential participants in Northwest Indiana and surrounding areas. The post called for women to complete an initial survey. The survey (see Appendix A) gauged prior interest in the true crime genre and inquired about typical media consumption habits, the user's preferred methods of entertainment, and preference of genre. The survey also gathered basic demographic information including age, gender, and location. A number of the questions were open-ended, which set the stage for the content of the focus group based on common themes found in responses. Open-ended questions were designed to elicit feedback about participants' favorite and least-favorite aspects of the true crime genre, the opportunity to share a true crime story that they felt demonstrated superior entertainment value, and a request to list the most engaging elements of stories they've consumed in the past. Based on those responses, focus group questions were tailored to encourage discussion of entertainment value via storytelling elements on each platform. Upon completion of the survey, participants were given the option to

provide contact information in order to be invited to an in-person focus group in South Bend, Indiana.

Those who chose to participate in the focus group were contacted separately via email and invited to one of four, 75-minute sessions that took place over the course of a month. Only four participants were allowed per group, so sessions were filled on a first-come, first-served basis. If a participant had to cancel, a follow-up email was sent to those remaining in the pool until the spot was filled. Participants had to be female and 18 years of age or older in order to attend.

Focus groups

The focus groups used the story of Tara Grinstead, a 30-year-old Georgian beauty queen and beloved high school teacher, who mysteriously vanished from her home in October 2005. Tara's story was chosen because it had been widely covered across a variety of platforms throughout the years. Each focus group had four participants and four stations. Participants spent 10 minutes at each station, listening to a podcast, reading a chapter of a book, watching a portion of a documentary, or browsing the website of Tara's story. Immediately following each station, participants completed a survey documenting the storytelling method they'd consumed, prevalent elements they noticed, and comparing and contrasting each platform (see Appendices B-E for post-station surveys). The post-station surveys consisted of a list of open-ended questions prompting the participant to take note of their immediate thoughts, preferences, and dislikes of each platform. They were asked to list favorite and least-favorite storytelling elements; to explain whether the story was engaging; to share their prior knowledge, if any, of the case; and to determine whether they would recommend that platform to a friend and why. The purpose of the post-station surveys was to serve as a primer for the group-wide discussion at

the end of the station rotation. Through the questions asked of them, participants were prompted to think critically about storytelling elements and their appeal as opposed to regurgitating parts of the story they had heard or getting too caught up in story details and ignoring the method of delivery. Participants were also able to look back at their notes during the design thinking session to jog their memory and help prevent confusion across the platforms. The surveys were also useful because they provided more detail than participants were able to give in the design thinking session, where rapid succession of succinct ideas is encouraged. The post-station surveys were collected at the end of the session and catalogued in affinity maps based on participant responses.

Once each station was complete, participants joined a design thinking session focused on the primary research questions for the study. The focus group questions were initially designed to discuss favorite and least-favorite elements of each platform, share the level of prior knowledge of the story, and provide suggestions to make each platform more appealing. However, after the first focus group it was found that the research questions that really needed to be asked in order to provide data that would be critical to this study were those focusing on the most and least-engaging storytelling elements of each platform, a question asking participants to choose their preferred method of consumption, and an opportunity to share why that method was most appealing. After the first session, the design thinking questions were tweaked as such.

Design Thinking

Each design thinking session asked a series of 10 questions and lasted approximately 20 minutes. The questions (Appendix F) covered the three pillars of research this study sought to explore, as well as participant reactions to each platform and the story in general. Participants used sticky notes to share their ideas, and each question was followed up with a brief facilitated

conversation to further explore their thoughts. Using design thinking was advantageous in this study because it organically created space for a multitude of ideas to be generated in a fairly short amount of time, allowing the commonalities between thoughts to naturally arise without overextending the focus group time.

Brown (2009) also focuses heavily on the human-centered approach to design thinking. That is to say, when observing a group in a design thinking session, it is important for the facilitator to observe the group dynamic, follow the participants from start to finish, and gather their thoughts and ideas regularly, hence the mid-session surveys and post-session design thinking activity. He also notes that during focus groups specifically, it is critical for the facilitator to watch “what people don’t do, listening to what they don’t say.” (p. 43). People’s non-actions or reactions proved to be just as important as the ones they shared outwardly.

Data analysis

Upon the end of the focus groups and the closing of the online survey, results were sorted into affinity maps based on commonalities between participant answers. Groupings were sorted based on type of platform, positive and negative opinions of each storytelling method, and participant preference as outlined in post-session surveys and the design thinking sessions. Online survey results were used largely to determine the demographics of participants and to gather a broad overview of platform preference and genre familiarity prior to launching in-depth focus groups.

Chapter 4: Results

This thesis employed a survey, focus groups, and design thinking sessions to determine what elements of true crime storytelling were most appealing to an audience of women and whether the platform influences the engagement of the story. The platforms included in this testing were a print book, a website, a podcast, and a documentary. This chapter presents the results from a survey designed to gauge participation interest level and prior knowledge of true crime. The questionnaires gathered immediate reactions following true crime consumption on a variety of platforms. Design thinking sessions encouraged discussion and deeper insights among focus group participants.

Participant Background and Survey Results

A total of 255 survey responses were collected. However, 58 were eliminated from the dataset due to invalid responses or incomplete surveys. This left a total of 197 survey participants. Given that this study focused on women only, participants were required to provide information about gender identity. Of those who completed the survey in its entirety, 195 (98.9%) respondents were female and two (1.1%) were non-binary. The average age of participants was 32 years old, with the youngest participant being 19 and the oldest 74. All 197 respondents indicated the number of true crime stories they've consumed regardless of the platform, with an overwhelming majority (95.9%) indicating they have read, watched, listened to, or researched online 11 or more stories since discovering the genre (Figure 1).

Of the 197 respondents, 189 of them indicated that they had consumed 11 or more true crime stories. The second most popular range was two to five stories (n=5) followed by six to 10 stories (n=3). In order to better understand the backgrounds of participants, they were asked which medium they most often used to consume true crime. As shown in Figure 2, 150

participants (76.1%) reported they typically listened to podcasts, while the second most popular response was watching documentaries (10.2%) followed by watching a television series (9.1%), browsing a website (2.5%) and reading a book (2%).

Respondents were asked to select from a list of elements they found most engaging about

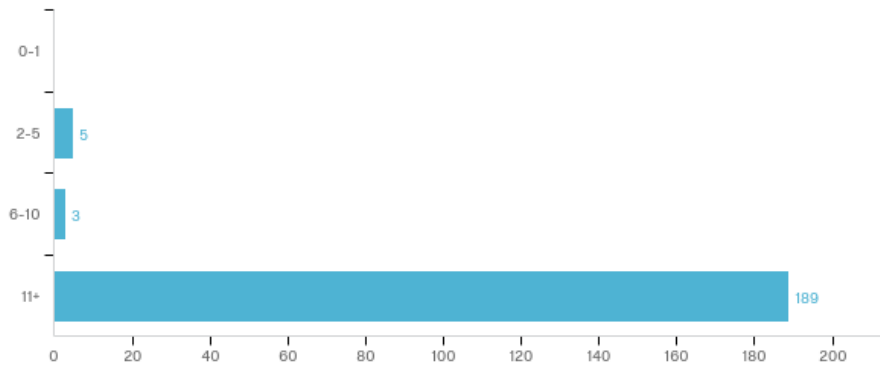


Figure 1. Number of true crime stories consumed

true crime as a genre and could choose as many responses as they felt applied (See Figure 3). In total, 441 responses were recorded. Options

included the platform on which stories are presented (n=114), the editing of the stories (n=39), the community surrounding the genre (84), the cautionary tales told within the stories (n=100), and the interviews with loved ones and/or survivors of the crimes (n=104).

Overall, survey

respondents

overwhelmingly prefer

podcasts over other

methods of consumption.

This preference could be

supported by their

comments about the very

nature of podcasts. Often,

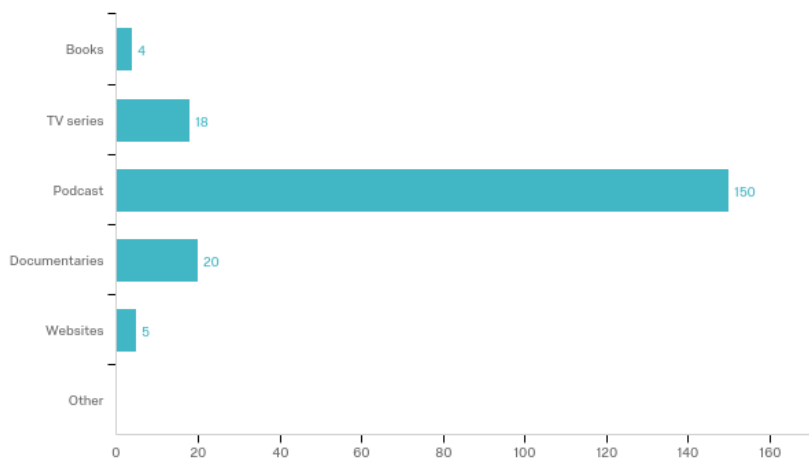


Figure 2. Preferred method of entertainment

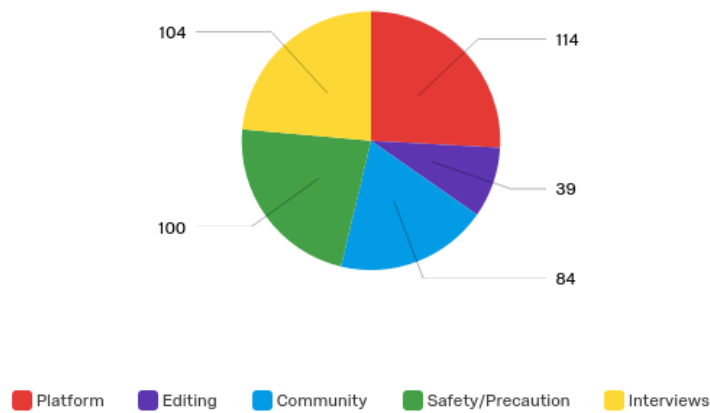


Figure 3. Most engaging elements

stories featuring elements like in-depth interviews with loved ones of victims or survivors, the convenience of podcasts serving as an on-the-go medium, and the precautionary tales told are desired by audiences, as demonstrated in Figure 3.

Focus Group Design Thinking Session Results

After the completion of four stations each showcasing a different method of storytelling, participants overwhelmingly chose the documentary and podcast when asked which they most preferred. Of 16 participants; 50% (n=8) chose the documentary, 44% (n=7) chose the podcast, none chose the website, and 6% (n=1) chose the book.

Documentary

Mayer’s (2012) assertion that visuals plus audio connect best with an audience is especially prevalent when discussing the results of the documentary. As outlined in Figure 4, the

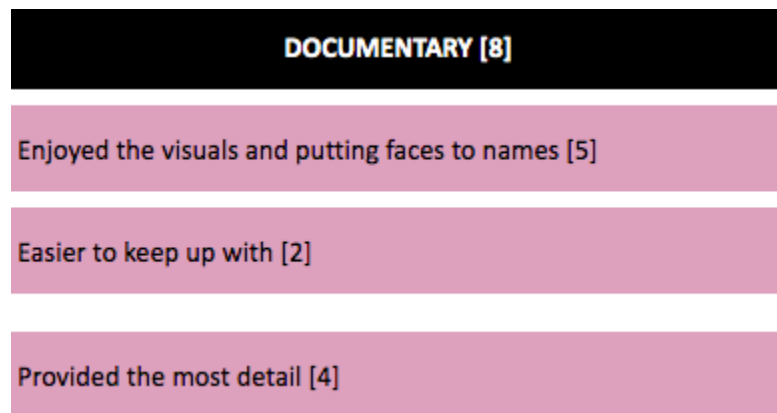


Figure 4. Preferred documentary elements

most common reason for preferring the documentary style of storytelling was the ability to visually put faces to names. This feature was mentioned five times, followed closely by the ability to see details otherwise left out.

When asked more in-depth questions surrounding the documentary specifically, a majority of responses regarding elements audiences prefer fell into three groups: interviews, visuals, and storytelling. Participants appreciated the ability to see interviews with the victim's loved ones, see photos of the victim as the story unfolded, and bring their minds' images of the setting and characters to life. Some participants also noted that a documentary is a way to catch the whole story without the commitment required of other platforms. One participant stated:

The documentary quickly tells you things you might miss in the other storytelling methods. For example, I didn't know that the story had progressed to the point that people had been arrested. The documentary got to that without me having to commit to listen to a whole podcast or read a whole book to find out how it ends.

More succinctly put, another participant said the documentary "got right to the point without the fluff."

However, the documentary-style storytelling had its drawbacks, too. Five participants stated that the story moved too quickly for them and they would have rather had the suspenseful build up offered by other platforms. One said:

The story was a little disjointed for me and seemed to skip around without ever fully telling the foundation of the story. I liked other platforms better that took the time to catch me up to speed before diving into the detailed bits.

That sentiment was echoed by other participants, who noted that the pacing was too fast for a newcomer to the story. One said that she viewed the documentary as a supplement to other storytelling methods, but not as a standalone piece, because "coming into this story as an outsider, it moved so quickly I found myself getting lost."

While some participants felt the interviews with the victim's loved ones were a compelling part of the documentary, others felt that they were overdramatized. As stated by one participant:

The filmmakers idolized Tara in the way they portrayed the interviews and even in the questions they asked. I felt like I was watching a highlight reel of a perfect person instead of getting to know the victim of a tragedy. It was less journalistic than I prefer.

Podcast

The next most popular method of true crime consumption among focus group participants was podcasts (See Figure 5). A large draw of podcasts was the convenience associated with the

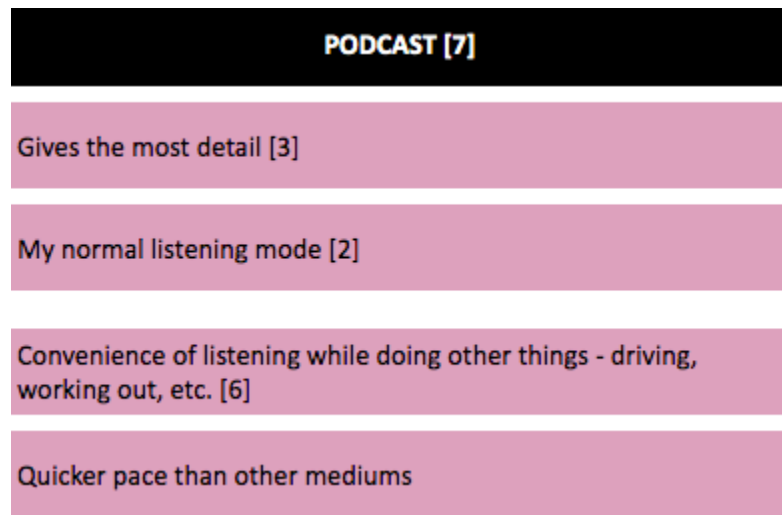


Figure 5. Preferred podcast elements

platform. Responses showed that a number of activities from exercise, to driving, working or even caring for a family were commonly done while consuming true crime via podcast. Participants noted the quick pace of each episode, the detail provided via interviews, audio

clips and phone calls with loved ones, and the normalcy of having something on in the background while performing other tasks as reasons podcasts were popular. One participant said:

I have such a busy schedule that I honestly don't have time to sit down to watch a show or read a book, even if I found them interesting. My life requires something that can be on the go with me, and it's easy to pop in my headphones while I'm doing other things and get my true crime fix while accomplishing other tasks that I have to do anyway.

When asked for more detail surrounding podcast preference, storytelling elements were overwhelmingly mentioned by participants. The level of detail in interviews, the mysterious cliffhanger nature of having to wait until the next episode to learn a big break in the case, and the sense of wanting more were popular responses. The reasoning described by participants isn't something new. As Stahl (2017) notes that podcasting presents the unique ability to split the

climax of the story over a few episodes to leave details lingering that beg for another episode. Print doesn't have that ability so explicitly. A narrative that's built through a host weaving in and out of storyland, sharing just enough detail to keep listeners hooked but not enough to spoil the show, is the key.

While the podcasting medium is appealing to many, not all participants were on board with the platform. Those who preferred another medium said that podcasts moved too slowly, required too long of a commitment, or felt unfinished at times. One participant stated:

While it was cool to know the story is unfolding as I listen to a podcast, it can be unsatisfying to commit to episode after episode only to come to the end of the season and be told there is no real ending. I prefer a medium that gives me an ending and closes the chapter.

Book

Only one participant chose the book as their preferred platform, but nearly all had thoughts on the delivery of the story. Participants overwhelmingly commented on the missing details in the story, particularly those of a visual nature. While a majority of the responses

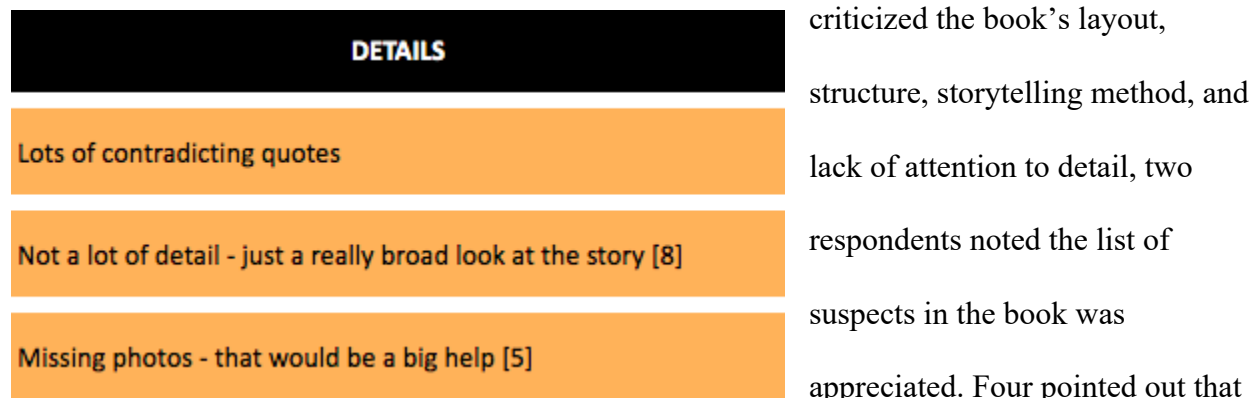


Figure 6. Participant book feedback

and another four praised the mysterious nature of the story itself, but not necessarily the storytelling of the author. Far more participants noticed inconsistencies, lack of visual details, and poor delivery across the board. One stated:

The book was really easy to read. I probably could have gotten through the whole thing had I had a few more minutes. But that's not a good thing. There was no meat to the story, not details shared that I couldn't find from a Google search. I wonder whether that's due to poor storytelling or due to the fact that the story was still developing long after this was published. Either way, if I'm going to read a book about a case, there had better be some pictures of the victim, the suspects, and the town. Big missed opportunity.

Another stated:

This was a really basic overview of a very complex story. The details weren't intriguing enough to keep me interested and certainly didn't warrant an entire book to be published.

Six participants compared the tone of the book to that of a gossip or tabloid magazine, stating that they would have preferred cold, hard facts and the opportunity to draw their own conclusions or explore the story further via another medium.

Website

No participants chose the website as their preferred method of consumption, but many noted that the material on the site was useful and engaging with prior knowledge of the story. The user experience of the website was a highlight; 10 participants commented on the interactive nature of the elements, the layout's organization, and the layers involved with each element of the site. The amount of detail on the website was praised as well. A majority (n=14) of participants commented on some element of detail, ranging from the interviews with family members to videos of the victim and a clear outline of the cast of characters presented throughout the story. The shortfall of the website, as described by participants, was the need for prior knowledge of the story in order to understand the material. One stated:

The website lacked a comprehensive, written overview of the story. Being that I have known the story, I really enjoyed all the elements and the opportunity to dive deep into some things I've been wondering about, but I could see how a newbie would have a really hard time understanding anything. This is a great supplement to other platforms but really can't stand alone.

Engaging elements

Regardless of the platform, there are a few non-negotiables participants agreed made a true crime story engaging (See Figure 6). One of those elements, mentioned seven times, is the need to get to know the background of the main character. As one participant said:

When I know the backstory and can relate to the victims like they’re people I could call a friend, it makes the story a lot more interesting to me.

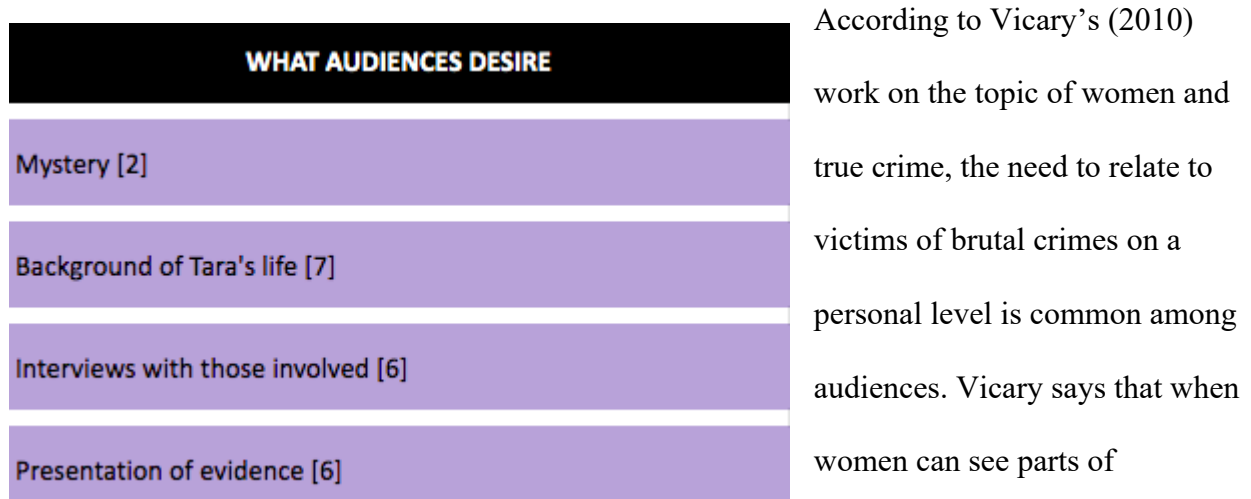


Figure 7. Preferred storytelling elements

According to Vicary’s (2010) work on the topic of women and true crime, the need to relate to victims of brutal crimes on a personal level is common among audiences. Vicary says that when women can see parts of themselves or their loved ones in

a victim, they’re more invested in the outcome by nature of feeling a “this could be me” trigger. Given that most true crime stories feature female leads, this happens often.

The second most desired element of true crime storytelling is a tie between presentation of evidence and interviews with loved ones and others involved with the case. The presentation of evidence was often described as participants appreciating when the facts were laid out in a way that made sense, kept all the storylines straight and introduced only relevant pieces of information. Interviews and “exclusive” opinions or retellings of the story were desired in order to fulfill a need to feel “in the loop,” as described by one participant. Some participants took the need to feel in the loop one step further, expressing an interest in the mysterious nature of the stories, regardless of the ending. Not only does mystery serve as a great catalyst to a cliffhanger,

it allows and even encourages audiences to draw their own conclusions about the case. As one said:

The nature of true crime kind of makes you feel like you're in on a big secret that nobody else knows about. It's like I'm collecting my own clues and gathering my own opinions. Sometimes I feel like an at-home detective, and those are the most fun cases to get really into.

Overall, the results of the exploratory survey and the focus groups generally align, with podcasts and documentaries being the preferred methods of true crime consumption among audiences. However, while podcasts were overwhelmingly preferred over other platforms in the survey, the focus group revealed shortcomings of the medium that participants were apt to point out. The mobility and overall user experience of podcasts was preferred across the board, but the commitment to engaging in an entire series, the cliffhangers at the end of each episode, and the lack of visual connection made users slightly less likely to choose a podcast over a documentary. In this particular sample size with this particular story, the documentary did a better job of connecting all the pieces for the participant, but not by such a large margin that the preference of the larger sample size to choose podcasts is invalidated.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This thesis explores a true crime story told across a variety of platforms, and the elements of each storytelling method deemed most appealing to audiences. This study included a survey, focus groups and design thinking sessions structured to explore each platform and encourage discussion among participants. The results of the initial survey indicated that audiences prefer the mobility of podcasts over other platforms, however the focus group results showed that documentaries outperformed podcasts by a slim margin. Additionally, this study identified the specific elements of true crime storytelling audiences expect, regardless of platform.

The findings of this study resulted in three key themes: 1) true crime audiences are detail-oriented and desire to connect with the story; 2) platforms that offer mobility and convenience are overwhelmingly preferred; and 3) audience engagement increases with the addition of visual components.

True crime audiences are detail-oriented and desire to connect with the story

Based on the results of the design thinking sessions, participants want as much detail in the storytelling as possible. They desire to hear from surviving loved ones, law enforcement officials involved with the case, and even want to hear old voicemails or see videos of victims. Participants reported that the more they saw themselves or a loved one in the victim, the more inclined they felt to follow through with the story to see how and why it ended. This finding aligns with Smith's (2018) assertion that given that true crime falls so close to home in terms of relatability with victims, audiences often stay tuned because they want to understand the motivation behind the gruesome act, perhaps even rationalizing a reason why it wouldn't happen to them in the process. Smith further explains that since true crime is so accessible across a

variety of platforms people have an opportunity to engage from the safety of their own homes, an environment in which they know they're not facing any imminent danger.

Seven of 16 focus group participants noted that podcasts or documentaries provided the most detail about the story, and that was a motivating factor in choosing those mediums as the most preferred across the board. Additionally, a number of responses in the design thinking sessions following the focus groups noted the preference of audio and visual details in the retelling of true crime stories. Based on all study results, it was overwhelmingly obvious that platforms like the website and book missed opportunities to provide sought-after details simply given the nature of the medium.

Platforms that offer mobility and convenience are overwhelmingly preferred

The relationship between the survey results and design thinking session responses showed a preference for the podcast platform. Participant statements showed that the convenience and mobility of podcasts allow them to consume true crime without having to alter their daily lives or dedicate time specifically to the story. The ability to engage with the story while traveling, eating, and even exercising was mentioned more than once in participant responses. The attitude toward documentaries largely echoed those of podcast fans. Even more so, documentaries provide a convenience factor that podcasts lack, in the ability of a documentary to tell an entire story in one sitting. Typically, podcasts take an entire season spanned across multiple episodes to complete a story. Even when "binge listening," or consuming the whole story at once, a number of hours are required to get through the whole story.

Podcasts, unlike the constraints of television, which must be pre-planned and carefully edited, can be produced much more frequently and give short snippets of information. As Stahl

(2017) explains, podcasters are able to start and finish multiple episodes in one recording session, editing is simple, and the ability to pivot on the fly as potential leads develop in stories is common. Movies, television shows and print don't have the same luxury. Podcasters are able to pump content to listeners as often as they please, creating an uncomplicated and cost effective medium by which to tell stories (Stahl, 2017). The convenience of listening to a podcast at one's leisure or catching an hour-long documentary in an evening are appreciated, whereas the commitment of setting aside hours to complete a book or finding time to browse a website are less appealing to busy audiences.

Audience engagement increases with the addition of visual components

Mayer's (2012) "multimedia principle" states that "people learn more deeply from words and pictures than from words alone" (p. 47). The results of this study support that statement, at least in terms of audience penchant for media that includes visual components. The common factor across the board from survey results to design thinking session responses was the more visuals included in a story, the more appealing it was to audiences. One of the most commonly mentioned reasons that the book didn't perform well in the focus group was that an opportunity was missed to include relevant photos of the victim, loved ones, and setting. While the podcast outperformed all other mediums in the survey, participants ended up preferring the documentary in the focus group by a slim margin. The most common reason for choosing the documentary over the podcast was the inclusion of visuals that a podcast can't do based on the nature of the platform. As evidenced by Vicary (2010), women desire to see themselves in the stories they consume. While podcasts make that happen through audio clips and bringing a victim to life via voice, documentaries have a leg up in that audiences have visual recognition of people and places at their fingertips.

Limitations and Future Work

Although the methods described in this study produced valuable results regarding audience preference of platform and storytelling features, they do not come without limitation. This study measured intriguing elements across a number of platforms but did not encompass all available forms of entertainment media, nor was each media format consumed in its entirety. Further research could take into consideration other methods of storytelling, as well as a call for deeper research into the psychological impact of each platform and the elements deemed most engaging. Given the nature of the solicitation post, participants of the focus groups were likely to be from a specific geographic region, and also likely to have a predisposed interest in true crime. They may have even heard the Tara Grinstead story before. In addition, a number of survey respondents were deemed ineligible since this study only took into account the perspective of women over the age of 18. In order to fully explore the true crime genre's most appealing storytelling elements, expanding this study with a larger and more diverse sample size would be necessary.

Another limitation of this study is the drastically different participant count between the survey (197 respondents) and the focus groups (16 participants). Given the focus groups included a very small subset of the overall participant pool, results could be skewed due to the personal preferences of those particular participants. For example, survey results indicated podcasts overwhelmingly outranked other mediums as the most preferred platform yet focus group results showed documentaries were favored by a slim margin. Determining the validity of this finding would require further testing with a larger number of participants or a more direct one-to-one group comparison.

The materials available for use in the focus group are a limitation as well. The *Up and Vanished* story was chosen for evaluation due to its presence on four storytelling platforms. No other true crime stories had this many options available. However, there has only been one full-length book published about the case, and the quality of the piece is rather poor, as indicated by focus group responses. Perhaps if there had been more books available, a higher quality option would have performed differently in participant rankings. The website was also the only one of its kind that focuses on *Up and Vanished*, and was actually designed as an extension of the podcast. It features each podcast episode in full length and grew as the podcast gained popularity, eventually adding supplemental materials in connection with each episode. Those who had heard the podcast before or had a general idea of the story and its components were interested in the website, as it served as a supplemental piece to their prior knowledge. However, the website was not designed to tell the story from start to finish and that may have been detrimental to its performance in participant preferences, as well. More accurate results could be found by choosing to focus on a story with a variety of offerings across platforms to ensure the highest quality and most comprehensive pieces were chosen for comparison.

It is still of note that podcasts overwhelmingly outperformed documentaries in the survey results. As Mayer (2012) explains, there are two separate channels—auditory and visual—used for processing information. Each channel has a limited capacity, which means humans can only process a finite amount in a channel at a time, so they make sense of incoming information by actively creating mental representations (Mayer, 2012). However, when one or both channels are overloaded with information, retention does not occur. According to the cognitive theory of multimedia learning, “adding interesting but extraneous material to a narrated animation may cause the learner to use limited cognitive resources on incidental processing, leaving less

cognitive capacity for essential processing. As a result, the learner will be less likely to engage in the cognitive processes required for meaningful learning” (Mayer, 2003 p. 48). Perhaps that’s the case with documentaries. As a one-off method of consumption, participants may have preferred to engage with visuals of characters and setting paired with in-depth narration in order to best understand the story. However, in long-term consumption of the story, audience’s auditory and visual channels may experience extraneous load (Sweller, 1999) and find the medium less preferable than a podcast, which eliminates interesting but extraneous material in a process Mayer (2009) refers to as “weeding.” In this instance, audiences are able to create mental images for themselves and cognitively take a break from processing and retaining information via both channels. Further research is required to validate this speculation, including a study specifically examining each platform over an extended period of time with Mayer’s cognitive load reduction strategies (2009) as a guide.

Conclusion

This thesis analyzes true crime storytelling across a variety of platforms and determines the most desired elements of the genre and preferred platforms for consumption. Additionally, it addresses shortcomings of platforms that aren’t popular and outlines the components needed to craft the retelling of a true crime story in a way that satisfies the audience. While a number of studies exist explaining why women specifically are drawn to the genre and the boom of true crime across the entertainment industry in the last decade, little has been recorded by way of exploring what storytelling elements are most appealing to those audiences. This study is a start toward filling that gap. The results show that audiences desire to get to know victims through learning their backstories and what led to their tragedy. Audiences prefer to hear from loved ones or survivors of crimes, both to help paint the picture of the victim’s life and to gain multiple

perspectives on the story. While the convenience and mobility of podcasts is generally favored by most, when given an opportunity to watch a documentary, the ability to visually connect faces with names, dedicate less time to a single story, and have a concrete ending might be preferred. The results emphasize the desire of audiences to engage with the true crime genre in a way that is convenient, mobile, and transparent. They suggest that podcasts and documentaries are the most effective media to meet the desires of true crime audiences.

References

- Ali, L. (2017). True crime isn't as true in its depiction of female victims. *LA Times*.
<http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/tv/la-et-st-the-keepers-true-crime-television-20170605-story.html>
- Boling, K. S., & Hull, K. (2018). Undisclosed Information—Serial Is My Favorite Murder: Examining Motivations in the True Crime Podcast Audience. *Journal of Radio & Audio Media*, 25(1), 92–108. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19376529.2017.1370714>
- Bogart, L. (2018). Why our true crime obsession is bad for society. *The Week*.
<http://theweek.com/articles/736073/why-true-crime-obsession-bad-society>
- Bootcamp bootleg. (2015). 1st ed. Stanford University, pp.1-41.
- Brown, T. & Katz, B. (2009). Change by Design: How design thinking transforms organizations and inspires innovation. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.
- Bruzzi, S. (2016). Making a Genre: The Case of the Contemporary True Crime Documentary. *Law and Humanities* 10, no. 2, 249–80.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17521483.2016.1233741>.
- Cooper, A. & Smith, E. (2011). Homicide Trends in the United States, 1980-2008. *Bureau of Justice Statistics*. <https://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbdetail&iid=2221>
- Dorn, A. (2017). Why Are Women Obsessed With True Crime? *The Hairpin*.
<https://www.thehairpin.com/2017/05/why-are-women-obsessed-with-true-crime/>
- Goldberg, K. (2018). The Serial Effect: How True Crime Came to Dominate Podcasts. *Discover Pods*. <https://discoverpods.com/serial-effect-true-crime-dominate-podcasts/>

- Lindgren, M. (2016). Personal narrative journalism and podcasting. *Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media*, 14(1), 23–41.
https://doi.org/10.1386/rjao.14.1.23_1
- Marks, A. (2017). How a True-Crime Podcast Became a Mental-Health Support Group. *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2017/02/the-true-crime-podcast-turned-mental-health-support-group/517200/>
- Mayer, R. E. (2012). *Multimedia learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mayer, R. E. & Moreno, R. (2003). Nine ways to reduce cognitive load in multimedia learning. *Educational psychologist*, 38, 43-52.
- McKelvey, T. (2013). Media “Missing White Woman syndrome.” *BBC News*.
<https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-22441124>
- Morgan, R. E. & Truman, J. L. (2017). *Criminal Victimization, 2017*. 30.
- Violence Against Women in the United States: Statistics. (2008).
<https://now.org/resource/violence-against-women-in-the-united-states-statistic/>
- Roberts, A. (2014). The “Serial” podcast: By the numbers. *CNN*.
<https://www.cnn.com/2014/12/18/showbiz/feat-serial-podcast-btn/index.html>
- Scott, H. (2003). Stranger danger: Explaining women's fear of crime. *Western Criminology Review*. Vol. 4, no. 3, 203-214.
- Smith, P. (2018). This Is Your Brain On True Crime Stories. *Huffington Post*.
https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/psychological-reasons-you-love-true-crime-stories_us_5ac39559e4b09712fec4b143

Stahl, M. (2017). Why True Crime and Podcasts Were Made for Each Other. *Rolling Stone*.

<https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/features/why-true-crime-and-podcasts-were-made-for-each-other-w476090>.

Sweller, J. (1999). *Instructional design in technical areas*. Camberwell, Australia: ACER Press.

The Podcast Consumer. (2017). *Edison Research*. <https://www.edisonresearch.com/the-podcast-consumer-2017/>

True Crime. (n.d.) In *Definitions online*. Retrieved from

<https://www.definitions.net/definition/TRUE+CRIME>

Vicary, A. M. & Fraley, R. C. (2010). Captured by True Crime: Why Are Women Drawn to

Tales of Rape, Murder, and Serial Killers? *Social Psychological and Personality*

Science, 1(1), 81–86. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550609355486>

Appendix A

1. Do you enjoy the genre of true crime?

Yes No

a. Why or why not? Please give a short explanation.

2. How many true crime stories do you estimate you've read, listened to, watched, or researched online?

0-1 2-5 6-10 10+

3. Is there a true crime story that sticks out to you the most? If so, please provide helpful information such as podcast or television series/documentary/book/website name or URL here:

4. Why is the above-mentioned true crime story so memorable?

5. How old were you when you experienced your first true crime story?

Younger than 10 11-18 19-29 30+

6. How do you most often consume true crime?

Books Television series Documentaries Podcasts

Website

Other (please list):

7. Why do you usually choose this platform over the others?

8. Do you usually prefer to consume true crime...

Alone With a group of friends With family With your significant other/a date Not at all

9. When consuming true crime, are you usually: (select all that apply)

Scared Anxious Uncomfortable Entertained
Curious Bored Amused Other: _____

10. How do you find true crime stories to consume?

Online searches Word of mouth Suggestions from other stories
Other: _____

11. What is your favorite thing about the true crime genre?

12. What is your least favorite thing about the true crime genre?

13. What aspects of true crime do you find the most engaging? (select all that apply)

14. To which gender do you most identify?

Female Male Transgender Gender Variant/Non-
Conforming Not Listed Prefer Not to Answer

15. Please indicate your age: _____

16. If you would be willing to participate in a focus group discussing your consumption of true crime across a variety of storytelling platforms, please provide your name and email below. Thank you!

Appendix B**Post-station Survey - Book**

The following questions ask you to respond to your experience reading a portion of the provided Up and Vanished book.

1. What did you think of the storytelling by the author?
2. What was most appealing about the book?
3. What was least appealing about the book?
4. What did you think about the level of detail the author used?
5. Were you interested in the story itself?
6. Would you continue reading this book? Why or why not?
7. Would you recommend this book to a friend? Why or why not?
8. What, if anything, was the book missing?

Appendix C

Post-station Survey - Website

The following questions ask you to respond to your experience browsing the Up and Vanished website.

1. What did you think of the website in general?
2. Did you consider the website to be interactive? How so?
3. What was most appealing about the website?
4. What was least appealing about the website?
5. What did you think about the level of detail offered on the website?
6. Did the website sufficiently tell the story of Tara Grinstead? If so, were you interested in the story itself?
7. Did you gain anything from the website that you wouldn't have known otherwise? If so, please elaborate.
8. Would you continue browsing this website? Why or why not?
9. Would you recommend this website to a friend? Why or why not?
10. What, if anything, was the website missing?

Appendix D

Post-station Survey - Documentary

The following questions ask you to respond to your experience viewing the Up and Vanished documentary.

1. What did you think of the documentary in general?
2. Did you consider the documentary to be informative? How so?
3. What was most appealing about the documentary?
4. What was least appealing about the documentary?
5. Had you seen the documentary before? If yes, how did you hear of it?
6. Did the documentary sufficiently tell the story of Tara Grinstead? If so, were you interested in the story itself?
7. Did you gain anything from the documentary that you wouldn't have known otherwise? If so, please elaborate.
8. Would you continue viewing this documentary? Why or why not?
9. Would you recommend this documentary to a friend? Why or why not?
10. What, if anything, was the documentary missing?

Appendix E

Post-station Survey - Podcast

The following questions ask you to respond to your experience listening to the Up and Vanished podcast.

1. What did you think of the podcast in general?
2. Did you enjoy the storytelling method used by the narrator? Please elaborate.
3. Have you listened to true crime podcasts in the past? What elements of this one are similar or different?
4. What was most appealing about the podcast?
5. What was least appealing about the podcast?
6. What did you think about the level of detail offered through the podcast?
7. Did the podcast sufficiently tell the story of Tara Grinstead? If so, were you interested in the story itself?
8. Did you gain anything from the podcast that you wouldn't have known otherwise? If so, please elaborate.
9. Would you continue listening to this podcast? Why or why not?
10. Would you recommend this podcast to a friend? Why or why not?

Appendix F

1. Had you ever had exposure to Up and Vanished: The Story of Tara Grinstead in any capacity prior to today? If yes, how?
2. Which storytelling platform did you most enjoy?
3. Why?
4. Which storytelling platform did you least enjoy?
5. Why?
6. What parts of the platforms you reviewed today were most engaging?
7. Least engaging?
8. Why?
9. Did you feel anything was missing from your experience? What would have made the story more interesting?
10. What additional elements would you add to these platforms, if any?
11. If you were to continue consuming this story, which platform would you be most likely to use, and why?
12. How would you go about sharing this story with a friend?

13. Is there anything else you'd like to note or discuss?