‘BEING A FANGIRL OF A SERIAL KILLER IS NOT OK’: Gatekeeping Reddit’s True Crime Community

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Abstract
All fandoms engage in gatekeeping. Whether or not we agree that contemporary media fandoms comprise something like ‘communities’, the ‘-dom’ suffix to the term ‘fan’ necessitates some conception of a group, and groups have boundaries. These boundaries are always in tension, and self-defined true crime fans are a tricky case. True crime is mainstream, an endlessly profitable and staple of the media landscape. However, true crime fans must negotiate and police a boundary that separates them from the posited figure of the Bad Fan. This article examines the Reddit subforums r/TrueCrime and r/SerialKIllers, analysing posts that discuss and police the boundaries separating the right kind of interest in true crime from this posited Bad Fan. I argue that while true crime enthusiasts tend to present their gatekeeping work as an ethical practice, it is often more to do with maintaining gendered norms than it is about morality or propriety.

Keywords
Dark fandom, fan community, fan studies, gender, othering, serial killers, true crime

All fandoms engage in gatekeeping. This is unsurprising. Earlier periods of fan studies considered online communities to be relatively bounded, coherent entities with solid norms and accepted practices (Baym, 2000; Bury, 2005). These academics were generally discussing text-based fora, but as the online landscape has shifted towards platforms whose affordances encourage a more multi-mediated, rhizomatic, networked form of engagement, there is less certainty about whether the term ‘community’ is appropriate (Bury, 2017). Yet whether or not we agree that contemporary media

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fandoms comprise something like ‘communities’, the ‘-dom’ suffix to the term fan necessitates some conception of a group, and groups must have boundaries. Rios and Rivera (2018) put it well:

what [. . .] fans do, be it either their fanworks, their posts within ‘discourse’ or arguments, or their chats and interactions, construe spaces and mark what is expected to exist in them. This construction relies on the existence of Others who do not follow these rules, either by not classifying the content properly or by enjoying content that should not be enjoyed or, if approached and liked, should be revelled in carefully. (pp. 33–34)

These rules, spaces and boundaries are always in tension, and especially so when it comes to so-called ‘dark’ or controversial fandoms. Broll (2020) defines dark fandoms as ‘communities of fans who identify with or otherwise celebrate those who have committed heinous acts, such as mass or serial murderers’ (p. 795). Yet the boundaries of dark fandom are not clear, and self-defined true crime enthusiasts are a particularly tricky case. On one hand, fascination with and entertainment/infotainment based on true crime is absolutely mainstream, an endlessly profitable and sometimes respectable staple of the media landscape. On the other, true crime fans must constantly negotiate and police a boundary that separates them from a posited Bad Fan – the obsessive fan of a criminal, the true crime groupie, the Tumblr girl who posts Columbine massacre fanart for the moral-panic condemnation of clickbait media outlets. This conception of the Other poses a threat to the self-conception of fan communities that consider themselves ‘properly’ and ‘rationally’ invested in true crime. This article reports the findings based on a study of Reddit posts in the true crime subforums, r/TrueCrime and r/SpecialKiller. The analysed posts attempt to maintain these spaces for the right kind of interest in true crime, policing their boundaries to exclude the posited Bad Fan. A search for posts relating to fans and fannish activity was open-coded to reveal several themes regarding how true crime enthusiasts police their space, as well as the complications and reflexivity inherent in these gatekeeping practices. I will argue that while true crime fans tend to present their gatekeeping as ethical work, it is actually more to do with maintaining masculinist gendered norms which have dominated conceptions of proper fandom.

First, I introduce the background literature on the gendered history of gatekeeping in fan studies. Then I describe the data sites and collection for this study, as well as the ethics and methodology. Then I move on to an analysis and discussion of the themes discovered by open-coding the data. I discovered that while true crime enthusiasts sometimes present their gatekeeping work as an ethical practice, it is often more to do with maintaining masculinist gendered norms than it is about morality or propriety.

Scholars have long attended to the ways fans police the borderlines of appropriate and inappropriate fannishness. When Nancy Baym wrote the influential *Tune In, Log On* (2000), which advocated for online soap fans as a social community, she was working within an academic culture just beginning to take the possibility of online community seriously. Applying her insights to fans within self-contained listservs, Baym found ample evidence for a coherent imagined community informed by common practices, norms and styles of communication. Returning to some participants 5 years after her initial research, she found that increased access to the lists had produced dissatisfaction among some participants that these ‘new’ fans were performing fandom improperly.
They did not conform to ‘proper’ communicative norms, such as spelling and capitalization, and their discussion lacked depth. This is common in older fandoms which had previously had relatively closed manifestations before becoming open to a wider userbase (c.f. Hadas, 2009; Plante et al., 2020).

As also acknowledged by Dunlap and Wolf (2010), gatekeeping frequently takes the form of accusing others of bringing fandom into disrepute; of behaving in a way that gives the fandom and its favoured texts a bad name (c.f. Barnes, 2019). While gatekeepers often claim to be acting in the name of quality, rationality or other supposedly neutral values, fan gatekeeping is often intensely gendered (Busse, 2013; Scott, 2019; Zubernis and Larsen, 2012). Valuations of Good Fandom frequently depend on a masculinist discourse favouring logocentrism, rationality, cultural capital, intellectualism and ‘propriety’: read – not too sexualised, not too emotional, no excess physicality (Hills, 2012). Matt Hills (2002) first introduced the notion of fans’ imagined binary between Good and Bad types of fandom in his seminal work Fan Cultures, and later demonstrated how fans of older texts engaged in a ‘repurposing of negative fan stereotypes’ (Hills, 2012: 26) to stigmatize female fans of Twilight, utilizing the sorts of stereotypes that used to be applied to fans as a whole (Jenkins, 1992). This sort of discursive construction goes on both within and between fandoms (Gonzalez, 2016; Fathallah, 2020; Zubernis and Larsen, 2012), and fans also internalize such judgements about themselves. In previous work, I have found that the elevation of alternative masculinities in emo[ntional hardcore] music fandom frequently involves denigration and distaste for feminine-coded behaviours associated with physicality, sexuality and excess of emotion. Here, I argue that while true crime enthusiasts sometimes present their gatekeeping work as an ethical practice, it is often more to do with maintaining masculinist gendered norms than it is about morality or propriety. This is particularly noteworthy given that most true crime fans are women (Murley, 2008; Vicary and Fraley, 2010). However, I also found a revival of certain stereotypes of ‘failed masculinity’ associated with male fans, depicting them as pathetic and stupid (Jenkins, 1992). I hypothesize that this ‘repurposing of fan stereotypes’, to use Hills’s phrase, helps the true crime enthusiast situate his or her own fascination with murder as Good Fandom, as legitimate and proper.

True crime fans have particular reason to gatekeep their interest. The ‘True Crime Community’ (TCC) is a self-description used by enthusiasts of true crime media on Tumblr, Reddit and social media sites. It is notable that the term ‘community’ is preferred, denoting boundaries and norms of behaviour, because the TCC must constantly negotiate with and attempt to distance themselves from the spectre of a different kind of fan. This is the self-professed serial killer fan: girls who profess their love for Ted Bundy and Jeffrey Dahmer, boys who admire the ‘accomplishments’ of Richard ‘The Nightstalker’ Ramirez, and a whole range of activities that fall uneasily into grey areas: the collection of mementoes associated with murder (‘murderabilia’); tourism of murder sites; joking and meme-making around the activities of serial killers. Some serial killers are celebrities (Schmid, 2005), and serial killer fandom has a long, dense history that predates fan studies by about a 100 years (Fathallah, forthcoming). Spree killers such as school shooters can develop a similar celebrity presence, thus the inclusion of r/TrueCrime in the data search (see below). Notably, the
term TCC on both Reddit and Tumblr refers almost exclusively to murder and especially to multiple murder, be that serial or spree killing. Certainly, all the search results in my data collection from either community that referred to specific crimes or criminals were to murder (see below): nobody in r/TrueCrime is discussing fans of fraudsters or non-violent thieves. For clarity, this article is not concerned with actual self-professed fans of serial killers and murderers, for which see my forthcoming book just referenced, but rather with the Reddit groups’ conception of them and the imagined binaries set up to distance themselves from this type of Bad Fandom, which is perceived to lack propriety, rationality and taste.

When Barnes (2019) interviewed true crime community members on Tumblr, several were eager to distance themselves from terms associated with ‘fan’ (p. 159). From an ethnographic perspective, Barnes calls this ‘boundary work’ (159). TCC members are only too aware that some of their activities might be perceived as straying too close to serial killer fandom, bringing the TCC community into disrepute. TCC members give quite specific examples of what sort of interest is justifiable, and what is not: interest in a killer’s, psychology, his background, even a degree of empathy or pity is acceptable as long as one does not excuse his crimes. Barnes argued that ‘while these explanations [for TCC activity] are reassuring, they remain confusing and troublesome’ because so many TCC blogs ‘revealed that the stuff that fans do – the art, fanfiction, jokes, memes’ (164, italics in original). A large amount of TCC content on Tumblr professes not to be famish – but it certainly looks that way. The architectures of Tumblr mean that the boundaries of a community are naturally unstable (Hillman et al., 2014). Content is filtered by user-defined tags. Users can create original posts or reblog posts from others, creating a mixed archive-scrabbbook effect. As Hillman et al. (2014) put it, one essentially becomes part of a Tumblr community when one feels that one is a member (p. 778). While users can block tags from their personal dashboard, or demand that other users ‘leave’ their fandom, there are no set groups from which a user can be ejected. On Reddit, the case is different.

The architectures of Reddit are traditional, having more in common with earlier, text-and-thread heavy phases of web 2.0 like mailing lists and UseNet groups than with the anarchic multimedia shortform structures of Tumblr (c.f. Bergstrom and Poor, 2021). Reddit is subdivided into millions of ‘subreddits’: discussion forums devoted to particular topics. A user creates a post, which may be a link, video, image or textpost, then others comment. A threading option is available to reply directly to comments. Subforums are moderated, and may set their own strictures within the general rules of Reddit. Users can be banned by moderators. Lynch (2022) argues that fandom on Reddit has a hierarchical rather than a rhizomatic form: moderators are the ‘ultimate gatekeepers’ in the sense they can use ‘executive fiat’ to exclude posters and comments from a subreddit (pp. 104–108). But gatekeeping also takes place via discussion and debate and via the karma system – Tumblr posts can be liked and reblogged, but Reddit has a hierarchy of comments wherein the most popular rise to the top by default4 and those that garner enough downvotes disappear, unless clicked on. The boundaries of group identities and fandoms are thus more definable on Reddit, particularly given its site norms of rational debate, discussion, logocentrism and the accumulation of knowledge-based cultural capital. These norms are culturally coded as masculine. As of
January 2022, Reddit users were 63.8% male (Statista, 2022), but in terms of gatekeeping, I consider this less important than what Nicholas and Agius (2018) term as ‘the persistence of masculinism’: that is, the privileging and consolidating of norms coded masculine over those coded feminine, regardless of participants actual sex. Women are the majority consumers of true crime content (Murley, 2008; Vicary and Fraley, 2010), but women can use masculinist values to police themselves and each other, as they do in other fandoms (Fathallah, 2020). As Massanari (2015) argues, site-wide Reddit norms particularly align with the performance of ‘geek masculinity’, which values technological skill, rationality, expert knowledge and dominance in debate. These Reddit norms are not always adhered to – on the contrary, they are sometimes satirized (Fathallah, 2020: 113–114) – but they hold as basic expectations. Thus, while the pathologization of feminine qualities can be observed in many fan spaces, the norms of Reddit also work to reinforce them here.

**Data collection; methodology and ethics**

To gather data evidencing how true crime enthusiasts gatekeep their space on Reddit, I used a Google browser and navigated to the popular subreddits r/TrueCrime and r/SerialKillers, and searched for the term ‘fan’ and ‘fandom’ within them. The results also included the plural forms of these nouns. I discarded irrelevant threads, such as those discussing being a fan of a particular podcast, in order to focus on threads discussing fans of serial killers or fans of killers specifically. Again, all of the results from r/TrueCrime related to murder. r/TrueCrime produced 21 relevant threads, and r/SerialKillers produced 32, gathered in March and April of 2022 and dating between 2017 and 2022. For context, r/TrueCrime hosts an average of 6570 threads per year, and r/SerialKillers an average of 2555 threads (Subreddit Stats, 2022). We should note that the fora were founded in 2010 and 2011 retrospectively, and search results only turned up relevant material dating to 2017. Quite possibly the search function is not reliable past a certain date, but on the other hand, it is to be expected that fan communities should become more self-reflexive on their boundaries as they develop and mature, in order to create and maintain coherent identities. In any case, we can say that while these discussions are relatively uncommon compared with the overall content of the subreddits, they have become persistent and ongoing. All the posts in r/TrueCrime discussing specific crimes or criminals referenced murderers, usually serial killers.

This case study is a discourse analysis utilizing manual open-coding of relevant forum posts. I chose to code the posts manually as the dataset was manageable in size, and online discussion can be allusive, ironic and non-literal in such ways that most automatic coding programmes would miss some nuance. I consider discourse from the critical perspective of active meaning-construction: I was seeking out the patterns and regularities by which these users gatekept their spaces, including analysis of the struggle and contest over meaning that is always present in discursive formations (Fairclough, 2003; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). I manually open-coded the results from both subreddits by copy-pasting all the threads into a separate document and reading through them several times, colour-coding them as themes emerged, and refining this process into subthemes on subsequent readings. The results were as follows:
(a) The pathologizing of feminine interest and female fans (subthemes: diagnosis of psychiatric problems, aberrant sexuality);
(b) The pathologizing of failed masculinity (subthemes: some men are just as bad as women; obsessive losers or nerds);
(c) Appropriate or inappropriate sentiment and attitudes (sub-theme: the appropriateness or inappropriateness of profit);
(d) The normality of one’s own interest in true crime (subthemes: defending academic and intellectual interest);
(e) Recognition that all interest in true crime is potentially problematic (subtheme: discussion of mainstream media treatment of serial killers);
(f) Expressions of Bad Fandom, so far as the sub moderators could be evaded.

When it comes to the citation of individual posts, I have sought to balance a deontological commitment to the users’ privacy with a pragmatic commitment to the research (franzke et. al, 2020: 5). I do not believe that a discourse analysis should paraphrase quotations: this could undermine the analysis of language in use by inserting the researcher’s own subjective interpretation. However, while the forums are public domain and usernames could legally be cited without permission, we should consider that participants in Reddit forums probably would not expect to be cited in academic research specifically (Sugiura, 2016). Therefore, I have deleted individual usernames from the references and attribute quotations to subreddits only.

Analysis and discussion

Both subreddits set out their rules on their frontpages, including ‘Don’t Glorify Criminals or Violence’; ‘No memes’ and ‘No sensationalist titles’ (r/TrueCrime, 2022) and ‘No glorification of serial killers’; ‘No Self-promotion/Merchandise Links/Murderabilia’ and ‘No Writing To Serial Killers’ (r/SerialKillers, 2022). Some of these are self-explanatory, others require a click on the expansion arrow to understand. Several are written with an explicit view to acknowledgment of the Bad Fan, and an understanding of his or her proximity. For example, under rule 2 of r/TrueCrime, the expansion gives typically ‘fanish’ examples of what is meant by ‘glorification’:

We do not allow any type of criminal glorification or glorification of violence. If you want to talk about your crush on Dylann Roof or find an address to write to Steven Avery in prison, this isn’t the place. [. . .]

This is a bannable offense. (r/TrueCrime, 2022)

r/TrueCrime is aware of that Other kind of fandom, and contends that this is not the place for it. Expanding the corresponding rule 3 on r/SerialKillers specifies: ‘This is a subreddit for serious discussion. No glorification/imitation/fan fiction. Please do not glorify serial killers or otherwise encourage violence’ (r/SerialKillers, 2022). Fanfiction and crushing are specifically feminine-coded fan activities. By this, I mean activities, behaviours and expressions associated with stereotypical femininity, such as emotionality, irrationality,
excessive enthusiasm and bodily response. As Nicholas and Agius demonstrated (2018), widespread cultural dislike of these properties is attributable to the continued elevation of values stereotypically deemed ‘masculine’ across multiple cultural spheres, as well as the masculinized norms of Reddit (Massanari, 2015).

Considering the themes as a whole, we can observe a model of Good Fandom versus Bad Fandom, which has much in common with those identified by Hills (2012) and Larsen and Zubernis (2013). The Good Fan adheres to successful masculine norms, and distances themself from the forms of failed masculinity associated with early fan stereotypes (Jenkins, 1992). They eschew behaviour coded as feminine, such as bodily investment and physicality. They are sane. They carefully guard the appropriateness of their emotional investment in the subject (see discussion). The masculine values of rationality and intellectualism are elevated over emotional enthusiasm or bodily response. I deliberately use ambiguous pronouns here, because female-identifying or other-identifying fans can uphold these boundaries just as well as male ones. On the contrary, we also see a recognition of the tenuousness of the Good Fan/Bad Fan binary (compare Fathallah, 2020) and a degree of reflexivity in this construction. We finally see some expressions of the qualities associated with Bad Fandom, so far as the subreddit moderators could be evaded, challenging the boundaries of the subreddits as Good Fan space:

(a) The pathologizing of feminine interest and female fans (subthemes: diagnosis of psychiatric problems, aberrant sexuality).

The first category of posts explicitly pathologized women and girls’ engagement with true crime media and with killers themselves. A frequently occurring item in this category was women who attempt to court serial killers. This phenomenon has been broadly documented in the mainstream press, including the attendance of female fans at the ongoing trials of Ted Bundy and Richard ‘The Nightstalker’ Ramirez (ArchiveNewsFootage, 2015; KRON 4, 2014[1990]). Some posters cast such women as ‘worse’ or more disturbed than the serial killers themselves. ‘Imagine being too weird for that dude’, says one user (r/TrueCrime, 2021) on a post discussing the fact that Ed Kemper was disturbed by some of his female admirers. One post, titled ‘The Woman That Creeped Out Ted Bundy’, links to and quotes from a news article that reports Bundy’s unease with one of his admirers:

When she started showing up at his trials, even Bundy got nervous. He wrote a letter to his wife, Carole, telling her to stop letting Janet sit near her so that he wouldn’t have to look at her. ‘There she sits contemplating me with her mad eyes like a deranged seagull studying a clam’, Bundy wrote. ‘I can feel her spreading hot sauce on me already’ (r/SerialKillers, 2019).

‘mad eyes like a deranged seagull studying a clam’ LOL. (r/SerialKillers, 2019)

The hot sauce part had me ROLLING. (r/SerialKillers, 2019)

While posters claim to abhor Bundy’s actions, they enjoy his description of his inappropriately obsessive sexual admirer, casting the Bad Fan’s deviant sexuality as so
ludicrous and disturbing that the murderer’s own perception of her rapaciousness is appreciated and endorsed. This is a good example of gatekeeping that is more concerned with appropriately masculine-coded behaviours than with morality. Others are more concerned with psychoanalysing female fans of serial killers, claiming that they suffer from ‘hybristophilia. It’s a fetish/paraphilia for violent criminals’ (r/TrueCrime, 2021). Some theorize that ‘a lot of those “fangirls” and even those befriending vile murderers or rapists in prison have that complex of “I can fix him”’ (r/TrueCrime, 2020). One user remarks, ‘I reckon in most cases the treatment would be Zoloft’ (r/TrueCrime, 2018). This is in response to a post titled ‘BEING A FANGIRL OF A SERIAL KILLER IS NOT OK’ (r/TrueCrime, 2020, caps in original). The term ‘fangirl’ is used pejoratively, much as it was in most fandoms before feminist-influenced fans and academics started to reclaim it (Larsen and Zubernis, 2013). Consider the post:

**BEING A FANGIRL OF A SERIAL KILLER IS NOT OK**

[. . .]

It’s ok to be interested in a killer. That’s fine. I’m interested in Albert Fish [. . .] But straight up wanting to DATE a serial killer is wrong. Ted Bundy fangirls often say that he shouldn’t have died even though he killed over 30 people, including a 12 year old girl. I don’t mean to burst your bubble Bundy fangirls, but if you lived around the time Bundy was on his crime spree, you would be dead [. . .]

Don’t act like you’d ‘sucide’ [sic] them into being a good person, I see you there, a 14 year old white girl crying over Billie Eilish while reading Dylan x Eric fan fiction.” (No offense to Billie, and I’m not racist or anything, because that’s basically me. I’m female and white. Except I don’t read serial killer fan fiction nor do I cry over Billie Eilish. But I do like her music). (r/TrueCrime, 2020)

All the hallmarks of the pathologized fangirl are here in this slightly confused disavowal, which negotiates the author’s proximity to the Bad Fan. The fangirl is young, oversexed. She writes fanfiction. She listens to pop music with too much emotion. Listening to pop music is okay – being female is okay – but performing these attributes excessively makes one the wrong kind of fan, just as being ‘interested’ in and learning about serial killers is ‘fine’ but fantasizing is wrong. But this post is so explicit in pathologizing the feminine that some respondents raise objections: ‘Ah, I see you feel as if you’ve found a morally valid way to act out your misogyny’, says one (r/TrueCrime, 2020). ‘My exact thought while reading the post’ says another (r/TrueCrime, 2020). ‘Same’, says a third (r/TrueCrime, 2020). In response to some objections, the first commenter goes on:

I would say ask yourself why OP would choose [. . .] to address an issue that is relatively small/ rare while taking shots at random unrelated female-centric things (Billie Eilish). (r/TrueCrime, 2020)

When the denigration of feminine-coded activity is too explicit, commenters become defensive. Elsewhere, on the thread, commenters reflect on what might cause the attraction to violence:
This is what happens when we groom little girls from birth to equate violence with love, tho [. . .]

Yeah, he's mean, he breaks laws, he lives on the wild side, he's a bad boy, just love him the right way, love him harder, pray for him, forgive him, try harder, work with him, change yourself, he just needs the love of a good woman, [or] you'll be the [sic] reason he snaps and shoots up a school. (r/TrueCrime, 2020)

This being Reddit, any feminist discussion immediately attracts comments like ‘Whoa, slow down, Andrea Dworkin’ (r/TrueCrime, 2020, and c.f. Massanari, 2015), but others agree and thank the commenter for the insights. It receives 131 upvotes, placing it near the top of the comment chain. Thus the post raises strong feelings, forcing some users to reflect on the misogyny inherent in fangirl pathologization. Some commenters attribute fangirl tendencies to youth, and believe that such girls will grow out of the improper sentiment. One posts:

None of this stuff feels real to them, they treat it like a fandom. If there’s one thing I remember about fandom, its projecting onto a character [. . .] I think a lot of these girls, if they were impacted by him in real life, would recognize how terrifying it was. But right now they’re sitting at a comfortable distance, numbing themselves to life’s atrocities by treating him the way they would an anime boy. (r/TrueCrime, 2020)

Another counters:

Lmao think again. Check out The Dark Tourist season 1 ep 3. The host goes on a Jeffrey Dahmer tour with a bunch of middle aged weirdo women who praise Jeffrey Dahmer. One of the women has an orgasm when looking at and touching the actual crime evidence. Thinking about it just makes me want to beat her up . . . (r/TrueCrime, 2020)

As Jones (2013) has demonstrated in her work on the media pathologization of ‘Twilight’ (mothers who are fans of the Twilight franchise), age-based pathologization of female fandom can work both ways – if too young, ridiculous, stupid and immature, if too old, creepy and pathetic. What we can infer from this is a high degree of emotion invested in keeping the gate between right and proper interest in true crime, and the Bad kind of fandom and in maintaining the subreddits as space for the correct type. Tumblr is situated as the opposing space, and blamed for much of the problem. Relegating ‘those people’ to another place is important: “Those people exist, but they don’t really mesh with these places’ (r/TrueCrime, 2021). I observed in my study of emo fandom that drawing boundaries of place for the ‘correct’ sort of fandom was a theme (Fathallah, 2020), though one increasingly imperilled by the porous boundaries of the Internet:

(b) The pathologizing of failed masculinity (subthemes: some men are just as bad as women; obsessive losers/nerds).

While pathologization of the feminine interest dominates the gatekeeping trend numerically, it was not the only theme. Indeed, there was a large section of posts and
comments devoted to gatekeeping against people in general who are wrongly invested in murderers, including, specifically, men. This is still in keeping with the persistence of masculinism, as such men were generally portrayed as having failed at masculinity in some way. Immaturity and the desire to show off are blamed as one factor:

The whole ‘I Love A Serial Killer’ thing has a big element of edgelord bullshit, I think [. . .]

We see it with teenagers playing Nazi, it’s the entire reason that Facebook thrives, and I think it plays a big part in why we hear the stories of the ‘serial killer lovers’. (r/TrueCrime, 2020)

The term ‘edgelord’ describes a person, usually male, who deliberately makes outrageous and provocative statements in order to seem unique, interesting and potentially dangerous. It is associated with extreme immaturity. One user observes:

I think part of it has to do with being an outlier. People inherently want to belong, but they also want to be unique and different. [. . .] Being a Bundy or Manson fan means you get to be part of something, but it’s not mainstream, you’re still unique? That’s how I would look at it at least. (r/TrueCrime, 2019)

Perhaps as the pathologization of fannishness in general recedes, some people deliberately seek outsider status by selecting a fandom that is largely considered inappropriaite. The same user compares it with a study on antivaxxer psychology, which argued that adherents embrace ‘a sense of superiority from being outside the norm, being better than the rest of society because you know better, you’re smarter, everyone else is a sheep, etc.’ (r/TrueCrime, 2019). The common thread again is the psychoanalysis of the Bad Fan, from a position (if hedged) of superior knowledge on behalf of the rational, educated and well-read true crime enthusiast; that is, the Good Fan displaying successful geek masculinity.

Others discuss male fannishness and inappropriately lewd or outlandish behaviour. This relates to the denigration of bodily response in favour of the rational intellect as a hallmark of both geek masculinity and Good Fandom. A particular target here is podcast hosts. One user was ‘grossed out when [as] /P[odcast] O[ta] /L[eft] /F[ast] /L[eft]’ went on about how “hot” and “fuckable” Casey Anthony is and haven’t listened to them since. Women who murder toddlers are not sexy’ (r/TrueCrime, 2021). The Last Podcast on the Left (Kissel et al., 2011) is a true crime podcast with a reputation for irreverence. This overlaps with the category of appropriate or inappropriate emotion around serial killer media, as one user describes an unnamed podcast as ‘3 or 4 men just having an immature mess around using some awful happening as context’ (r/TrueCrime, 2021). Other posters discuss the notion that males can also exhibit Bad Fandom by evoking the term ‘fanboy’, historically associated with obsession, neediness and bathos (Jenkins, 1992). This is interesting given that Reddit generally valorizes geektitude (Massanari, 2015); but this geektitude is associated with stupidity rather than intelligence. Users mock a picture of supposed fans posing with John Wayne Gacy in prison: ‘I’mao imagine going out of your way to meet this fat suck of shit’ (r/SexualKillers, 2021). Another suggests that ‘The tall guy w the long hair [. . .] is just Gacy’s type. He wouldn’t be laughing if he were alone
in Gacy’s house and knew the horror that awaited him’ (r/SerialKillers, 2021). ‘Disgusting’, says a third, ‘I despise these fan boy types’, before utilizing the very phrase Jenkins (1992) posited as the summation of fan pathologization in the eighties and nineties: ‘Get a life’ (r/SerialKillers, 2021). Another user ‘remember(s) back when the incel subreddit was around, those guys were calling [Ramirez] “Chad Ramirez” [. . .] Only incels would think so low of themselves as to put someone like Richard Ramirez above them’ (r/SerialKillers, 2020). This requires some unpacking. Most readers will probably be familiar with the online slang term ‘incel’, or involuntarily celibate male. A ‘chad’ is the opposite of an incel: a male who is successful, virulent, popular, athletic and attractive to women. The designation of Ramirez as a ‘chad’ plays into the misogynistic idea that women are literally only attracted to appearances. Of course, the subreddit r/SerialKillers is mocking the men who believe this sort of thing, aligning it with the pathetic, low self-esteem trope of pathologized fandom and an associated model of failed masculinity.

At other times the prospect of male attraction to serial killers is discussed. One user tells of a male friend with

A serious sexual fixation with the serial killer William Bonin. One day we were video chatting and he was super excited to show me something he had received in the mail. It was a big autographed photo of Bonin that he told me he paid a lot of money for [. . .] It’s quite disturbing the number of people (not just women) that idolize and lust after serial killers, mass shooters, and the like. (r/TrueCrime, 2020)

Another male user is castigated and downvoted (though not banned) for going ‘too far’ in his admiration of or interest in Richard Ramirez admitting to have ‘adopted him into [his] aesthetic’. Despite claiming to ‘never lose sight of his crimes and how they impacted people’ (r/TrueCrime, 2020), the immediate response is, ‘I’m here to tell you that wearing a necklace with a serial killer’s face on it has crossed the line into romanticising him’ (r/SerialKillers, 2021). Although the poster is male, wearing a necklace is a feminine-coded activity connoting romance and affective attachment. There is also some discussion of whether the small number of famous convicted female murderers receive the same sort of adulation from men as certain male killers do from women, with users generally agreeing that men may be visually attracted to violent women, but female fans tend to be more serious and devoted in their attractions. Overall, male fans may be pathetic or stupid, models of failed masculinity, but women and feminine-coded behaviour were seen as more distinctly pathological. Both of these categories belong to the construction of Bad Fandom:

(c) Appropriate or inappropriate sentiment and attitudes (sub-theme: the appropriateness of inappropriateness of profit).

The next key category I found in coding was appropriate or inappropriate emotion and attitudes. Naturally, this hooks into gender as well, because in Western culture, emotion and affective bodily response is gendered feminine, opposing the rational, distanced response of the masculine-coded mind. Interestingly, once the
discussion moved to male fans who are also content producers, they were more likely to be figured as pathological than the fans depicted above. Many posts and comments centred on the inappropriateness of humour and entertainment in consuming true crime.

‘Unpopular opinion’, states one user as a post title: ‘Comedy true crime podcasts are disrespectful and inappropriate’ (r/TrueCrime, 2021). The consensus in replies is that comedy per se is not the problem – the point is that the comedy must be properly directed. Victims should not be mocked, but some podcasts do ‘a good job of knocking a lot of so-called genius level serial killers off the pedestals they have been placed on’ (r/TrueCrime, 2021). Mainstream coverage of true crime tends to falsely portray serial killers as brilliant, charismatic psychopaths (a popular impression with no data to support it). Users point out that comedy podcasts ‘shine a light on the massive incompetence of police investigations’ that allows many serial killers to murder over several years (r/TrueCrime, 2021). But posters are in general quite concerned with the tone of true crime podcasts:

This is how I feel about M(y) F(avourite) M(urder) and Sword and Scale hosts. Mike Boude or whatever the fuck that creeps name is. I just don’t believe that he is disgusted by the crimes and honestly get a sense that he get some kind of sexual gratification from telling these stories and the same with the MFM girls [...] I get a similar feeling with them that its more than just telling stories but they get off the stories in some way. (r/TrueCrime, 2020)

The sex of the hosts is relevant here – the hosts of My Favourite Murder (Kilgariff and Hardstark, 2016) disparagingly referred to as ‘girls’ (they are of course adult women) ‘Mike Boude[t]’ is insulted as ‘creep’. Both are getting described as deriving inappropriate bodily enjoyment from their subject matter: they ‘get off [on] the stories’. Another poster describes LPOTL as ‘basically if annoying morning zoo dj’s had a true crime podcast’ (r/TrueCrime, 2021). On the contrary, some users find podcasts and channels ‘that try to be ove[]ry serious and take the creepy/scary tone [. . . ] disrespectful’ (r/TrueCrime, 2021). Disrespect is the common theme, be it through humour or attempting to make entertainingly ‘spooky’ content out of murders. By this strategy, users reassure themselves that their own interest in true crime is respectful and respectable, the Good Fan position making up the opposing side of the binary.

A sub-theme here was the appropriateness or inappropriateness of profit, at the self-promoting focus of many YouTube channels. ‘I was never into the “pretty YouTuber who does her makeup while discussing horrible things”’ posts one user (r/TrueCrime, 2021). The so-called ‘Murder and Makeup’ formula was popularized by YouTuber Bailey Sarian, who is now a successful fulltime content creator and Streamy Award recipient. Many commenters dislike this femininized format on principle: ‘The level of glamour just doesn’t fit with TC narratives. In fact, I think the focus on self-glamour when telling tragic/horrifying stories is messed-up’ (r/TrueCrime, 2020). Others are more uncomfortable with the potential for YouTubers to profit from their output ‘when true crime YouTubers talk about their sponsors at the beginning of their videos, because the tone change is so jarring’ (r/TrueCrime, 2021). Others counter that true crime is an enormous industry:
People have been making money off true crime for centuries, back to the newspaper publishers that sensationalized all sorts of crimes in the 19th century to sell papers. [. . .]

Some people have done it sensitively and contributed to justice for victims. Some are exploitative. That’s always been the case. (r/TrueCrime, 2021)

This is an interesting divergence from the tendency to pathologization of the feminine seen in other fandoms. The only other time I have seen the professionalization of fan activity stigmatized is from a broadly feminist perspective – to wit, criticism of individuals making money from fanfiction projects which have ultimately been a communal endeavour (Jones, 2014). Here, posters keep returning to the question of tone, and the difficulty of precisely pinning down what crosses a line into exploitation – or unacceptable exploitation, if one accepts there is no such thing as ‘innocent’ production and consumption. One user actually attempts a sort of ‘best practice’ list, bullet-pointed advice to creators such as

I don’t think it’s very respectful to make your face the focus of the thumbnail. It seems a bit disingenuous to do so when the purpose of true crime content isn’t strictly for entertainment, it’s for information/education purposes. When you put your face as the focus of the thumbnail, coupled with a sponsor/ad revenue, it really makes the video seem exploitative. (r/TrueCrime, 2020)

Note the hedging that true crime ‘isn’t [shouldn’t be] strictly for entertainment’. This hedge acknowledges that entertainment is a byproduct of media consumption, even if its ‘purpose’ is educational. The post advises creators to give proper credit to sources and not to pad out their runtime with ‘unaltered clips’, as this ‘increases the number of ad spots, which brings it back to the whole exploitative over informational thing’. This poster invokes a legal framework to justify their advice to alter material, noting that ‘if you are using long stretches of uninterrupted footage of a 911 call or other news reports, your argument of fair use weakens because you aren’t being transformative’ (r/TrueCrime, 2020). This is interesting, because normally, transformative fanwork is gendered feminine, emotion-based and less ‘respectable’ to the cultural mainstream than ‘affirmative’ fandom, which broadcasts and reemphasises already extant content and is typically gendered masculine (Scott, 2019). This advice flips the script – true crime content is made more respectible via transformation, as affirmative fan content lazily profits from the sufferings of other people. This borderline is policed with some reflexivity: users admit to ‘keep[ing] an eye’ on themselves (r/TrueCrime, 2021), that their interest does not stray too far into inappropriately emotional territory. This relates to Zubernis and Larsens’ (2012) observations on how fans internalize stereotypes and police their own behaviour accordingly:

(d) The normality of one’s own interest in true crime (subthemes: defending academic and intellectual interest).

The next set of comments takes a different approach to gatekeeping, by arguing for the normality of the user’s own interest in true crime, as contrasted to the abnormality of the fan(girl)’s. Here we see illustrations of how the Good Fan (Self, Us) is...
constructed in opposition to the Bad Fan (Other, Them). The trope of complaining that inappropriate activity of the Bad Fan brought their community into disrepute was extremely common:

There is nothing wrong with being interested in serial killers/true crime, but it starts to become an issue where you’re attracted to the killer, fantasise about them and romanticise their crimes. Please don’t do this, because it actually destroys the True Crime community’s name. (r/TrueCrime, 2020)

[Bad Fandom] makes true crime fans look like creeps! The amount of times I’ve mentioned my interest to people and get responses ‘oh like the people who fall in love with serial killers?’ Like no!! Not at all! This is a murderer hating zone! This fandom is filled with pure hatred of murderers! (r/TrueCrime, 2020)

This user does refer to true crime interest as a ‘fandom’ but is quick to distance it from the fandom of actual killers. Although insisting they are ‘no fangirl’s, (r/SerialKillers, 2020), users are keen discuss, justify and normalize their fascination with true crime and with individual killers. I posit that it is the proximation of the imagined Bad Fan, their relative closeness through commonly used websites, favoured texts and shared interests, that give rise to this anxiety (c.f. Barnes, 2019). Commenters on these subs remind themselves and each other that ‘historically this is how people have been about crime and murder’ (r/TrueCrime, 2020):

every time this subject comes up i remember what i read in ‘the invention of murder: how the victorians reveled in death and detection and created modern crime’ by judith flanders. [...] historically people have always done things like touring houses of vicious crimes, taking pieces of it and the victim […] judith flanders specifically talks about punch and judy shows, the spectacles made of hangings and other executions. (r/TrueCrime, 2020)

Note how the commenter makes casual reference to an academic text, boosting their argument with authority, in keeping with the logocentric, geek-masculinist norms of the site. However, there is some complication of this tendency when female commenters posit that the reason ‘so many more women are into true crime than men’ ‘has to do with feeling like you have some kind of control over it happening to you as long as you learn enough about it’ (r/TrueCrime, 2021, and see Vicary and Fraley, 2010). These users also refer to ‘research’ and ‘scholarly papers’ to conclude that the reasons underlying people’s attraction to the genre are complicated, ‘especially for women, who are the majority of consumers of true crime’ (r/TrueCrime, 2021). Posters avow interest in psychology, sociology and nature/nurture debate, all comfortably academic, rational and middle-class perspectives: these norms align with geek masculinity. Yet users are specifically defending female interest in the subject on the grounds of ‘feeling’: ‘feeling’ like one has control over becoming a victim, which is not particularly rational. Some users acknowledge that they engage in ‘dark tourism’, and link to university research pages on the phenomenon, while asserting that ‘it never felt like a fandom thing to acknowledge the events that took place at those locations’ (r/TrueCrime, 2017):
(e) Recognition that all interest in true crime is potentially problematic (subtheme: discussion of mainstream media treatment of serial killers).

This brings us to possibly the most interesting and critical theme coded: the acknowledgement that all consumption and production of true crime media is in some way problematic, showing awareness that the performance of ethical and moral stances in gatekeeping is not necessarily justified. This category explicitly troubles the Good Fan/Bad Fan binary in highly reflexive ways. ‘Almost all conversation of true crime is exploitative by nature’ says one user (r/TrueCrime, 2021). ‘The media of course fuels it but only because we’re the ones tuning in’. David Schmid (2005) has discussed in-depth the relationship between the media, law enforcement, murderers and general public, which work cooperatively to produce the cultural figure of the serial killer. Some commenters chastise others for attempting to police the boundaries of appropriate fandom:

if everyone is so worried about the inherent exploitative nature of true crime than we might as well pack it in and not discuss it [. . .] being ~serious~ about it doesn’t make it any less voyeuristic into someone’s personal tragedy. (r/TrueCrime, 2020)

Many of these comments take issue with the appropriate-tone policing:

The people in this thread are moralizing, acting like the only reason they’re here is for edification. Don’t get me wrong, my interest in true crime is largely intellectual and academic. But to say there isn’t an element of entertainment would be a farce [. . .] If you’re trolling through reddit for true crime, you’re most likely doing it for entertainment. It’s that simple. (r/TrueCrime, 2021)

A sub-theme of this category was criticism of the media for romanticizing serial killers in ways likely to encourage Bad Fandom and fangirling, such as casting attractive young actors to play them. A user who claims to be a journalist criticizes coverage of mass shooter fandom as ‘irresponsible because I wouldn’t want anyone who is crazy enough to be the next James Holmes to see the love he’s gotten and think they will get the same in prison’ (r/TrueCrime, 2020). Others cite examples of criminals whose professsed aim has been to become famous. These are all male. Thus there are two types of Bad Fandom the media is blamed for encouraging, and these are distinctly gendered: (a) falling in ‘love’ with criminals (feminine) and (b) imitating them (masculine): ‘It really is a double-edged sword’, another user muses: ‘I want to know about these people and their crimes not just as a true crime fan but a member of the general public for safety reasons. However, it just emboldens the sociopaths and psychopaths of the world’ (r/TrueCrime, 2020). It is a fine line and a difficult balancing act between discursively containing said ‘sociopaths and psychopaths’, and acknowledging the implication of all media production and consumption surrounding true crime in entertainment and profit from suffering:

(f) Expressions of Bad Fandom, so far as the sub moderators could be evaded.
Finally, as a challenge to the sanctity and certainly the norms of the Reddit space, there is a category of posts that appears to have made it past the gatekeeping enforced by moderators, in line with the community rules, to express what sounds very much like straightforward fandom of killers. These posts trouble the binary in a different way, challenging gatekeeping practices that seek to cordon off the forums as a Good Fan space, relegating Bad Fandom to elsewhere. Some of these comments may have been collected before a moderator could find them. There is always a time-lag in moderator gatekeeping, during which the statement makes an impact on the discourse of the community. Some users in Reddit spaces actually admit attraction to killers, but they tend to temper it:

For me, I’m solely ‘attracted’ to their brain chemistry, lol. I’ve always been drawn to the strange and unusual, and crime is a part of that [ . . . ] I think we’re all secretly attracted to that which we can’t comprehend, explain, or relate to, and serial killers fit all three. (r/SeriesKiller, 2022)

Same it is not really the whole sexual attraction I just want to know what happens in their brains like how we react to normal things in everyday life and how psychopaths react to normal things. (r/SeriesKiller, 2022)

Physical (feminine) attraction is a little too far, but intellectual (masculine) attraction is sort-of-possibly-okay. Another fannish tendency was to rank and review killers, though commenters claim to abhor their acts; I saw no qualms around discussion as to who was better at killing, most inventive, best at evading police. A poster dismisses both Jack the Ripper and the UK doctor/serial killer Harold Shipman as not being ‘remotely interesting’ observing, ‘you couldn’t pay me to read a book or listen to a podcast about [Shipman]. Boring a[s ]f[uck]’ (r/SeriesKiller, 2021). A responder ‘agree[s] with [her] about Shipman’, complaining, ‘barely any sport in his crimes’, but contends that ‘Jack The Ripper is actually fascinating’ (r/SeriesKiller, 2021). ‘Sport’ is a choice noun here, positing serial killing as a competition, and this sub-theme was not unusual. Commenters complain of killers being ‘sloppy’, their extended sprees enabled more by the ineptitude of the police than any particular genius or skill, while others defend their favourites. ‘Favourite’ and ‘least favourite’ are freely used terms:

[Israel Keyes] was so full of it. Ted Bundy would be in a total other level compared to that blow hard, mostly because things he claims actually took place [ . . . ] He’s like the b[ind] [torture] k[ill] [killer] bit with less follow through . . . and kills obviously. (r/SeriesKiller, 2021)

‘Kills’ sounds like the ‘score’ in this sport, as it would be in a videogame. Some commenters post in clear violation of the rules regarding writing to serial killers: ‘How would I go about writing to Ed Kemper?’ asks a use with a distinctly feminine username, in blatant yet unmoderated violation of r/SeriesKiller’s rule 9: ‘I tried looking up the po box or something and couldn’t find anything. How do I do this?’ (r/SeriesKiller, 2017). Some posters do assist with advice, but others criticize the intention and downvote the comment. The original poster defends herself: ‘Stop downvoting me. I’m not one of those “ted bendy [sic] is hot 1111!” people if that’s what you think. I’m interested in psychology and evil and morality type stuff in this situation’ (r/SeriesKiller, 2017). In response to a deleted comment apparently criticizing her username, she responds that it
is intended to be ironic. This criticism is gendered, and drawn by the feminine username. We can demonstrate this because when a user posted the news that British serial killer Dennis Nilsen had died in the same subreddit, one user responded:

F*ck. Sent him a letter for the first time literally 2 days before he died! Dammit! Guess I won’t be getting a reply . . . Oh well. RIP, British Dahmer (r/SerialKillers, 2018).

No one insults the user directly for this, though one response reads ‘Ha ha tough luck mate’ (r/SerialKillers, 2018). Another user asks politely:

Just out of curiosity. What sort of thing did you or do you put to a Serial Killer? Do you try to get him to explain the reasons behind why he did what he did, or do you try to understand why he did what he did? [. . .] It is sort of like a fan mail thing? (r/SerialKillers, 2018)

The question is hedged and the implication that the letter might be ‘fanmail’ is not criticism. The response is that the user simply introduced himself and asked some innocuous questions about prison life, hoping to build up to questions about his crimes. In fact, though several users brought up the topic of writing to serial killers on both subreddits, it was only the one with a stereotypically feminine username that is castigated for it.

Conclusion

As the category of fan is reclaimed, mainstreamed and commercialized, we ought to attend to the complex ways that fan stereotyping and othering is deflected onto certain types of ‘unacceptable’ fandom. Previous authors have suggested that this is a gendered process, as the sort of fans and fanworks deemed culturally feminine are more likely to be pathologized and less likely to be convertible to cultural and economic capital. This article employed a test case around the form of true crime fandom that, while common and largely culturally acceptable, shares an uneasy borderline with the pathologized fandom of killers. Reddit users who are invested in true crime use a range of distinct and definable techniques to gatekeep the subreddit spaces against contamination by their conceptions of Bad Fandom. Often, this gatekeeping has an air of intellectualism, invoking the language of academia, psychology and social sciences to construct the user and their community as having proper, respectable and ethical interest in crime and killing, as opposed to the Bad Fan of actual killers. In this article, I have demonstrated that this process is often more to do with the maintenance of gendered norms than it is with reason or morality. The concept of the Bad Fan involves pathologization of qualities that are culturally coded feminine, and while this can be observed across multiple fan spaces, the masculinized norms of Reddit also reinforce it here. The Bad Fan is definable in terms of the stereotypes that were once applied to fandom more broadly – feminine, insane, irrational, sexual in the wrong way, hysterical and young (Bacon and Smith, 1992; Jensen, 1992). Where applied to males, it tends towards the stereotypes of geeks and losers documented by early fan studies theorists (Jenkins, 1992), a type of failed masculinity. Although most true crime enthusiasts are women, women are perfectly capable of upholding discourses that privilege culturally masculine values (Nicholas and Agius,
2018). However, the conceptual proximity of the Bad Fan gives rise to unease and self-reflection regarding one’s own supposedly ‘normal’ interest in true crime, reflection on the media industry’s engagement with true crime as a whole, and a tense policing of borderlines around acceptable and unacceptable content.

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Notes
1. It is possible to change the order, for example, selecting an option for comments to be sorted by date.
2. The commenter is referring to Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, the perpetrators of the massacre at Columbine High School in 1999.
3. This is something of a technicality, but the mention of Manson is the one exception to the rule of posts applying exclusively to murderers. Although Charles Manson was found legally responsible for the murders committed by his followers, it has never been established that he personally killed anyone.

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**Author biography**