

Social media offers new perspectives on serial killer fascination

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From podcasts to shorts, the topic of serial killers is likely to receive a significant amount of attention on social media sites. But what is it about this subject that captures the imagination of millions?

Edith Cowan University (ECU) Senior Lecturer Dr. Laura Glitsos and Professor Mark Deuze from the University of Amsterdam, said that despite obvious pitfalls, social media offer people the opportunity to reclaim conversations away from traditional media outlets such as newspapers and television, while engaging around the phenomenon of serial killers provides them an avenue to discover their own humanity.

"In social media settings, like Reddit or YouTube, anyone can interact within that space. The gatekeeping function from the traditional outlets is removed, giving anyone with a device the opportunity to take part in the narrative, to help form the conversation.

"One of the most interesting things that have come from this research is that people really want to be able to express and participate in a community that doesn't leave its humanity behind, and that takes a stand against encroaching feelings around uncanniness, which is represented, as we argue in our research, by the [serial killer](#) phenomenon," said Dr. Glitsos.

In her latest research, Dr. Glitsos noted that commentators on [social media posts](#) that revolve around the topic of serial killers, often attempt to bring back a sense of humanity and connection to the topic, offering not a glorification of the crimes committed, but rather commiserating with those that have been impacted by these events.

The study, "Serial killers and the production of the uncanny in digital participatory culture," was [published](#) in *New Media & Society*.

The archetype of serial killers serves a social function at an individual level, said Dr. Glitsos, with people engaging with the idea and mythology of the serial killer to work through different emotions and experiences that they have about the world more generally.

"You can think about the way that contemporary life can feel so connected, yet so detached at the same time. And it is really fascinating and allegorical that we can take that 'dehumanizing' experience and explore it using the serial killer as a narrative.

"Serial killing as a topic in popular media appears so prevalent, which is a paradox because it is such an awful thing. But as individuals in the world, we are constantly trying to understand our place in it, and the serial killer becomes a totem of this paradox.

"They are at once both human and inhumane, which is a little bit similar to living in this contemporary landscape where we engage with things like artificial intelligence, which seems so human, but is obviously not."

Dr. Glitsos noted that there was a distinct difference in the way that users from different [social media platforms](#) approached the topic of serial killers.

"Social media platforms that are visual in nature, like TikTok, are often short, and therefore can give less information and less depth to the story, whereas Reddit has less virality because a post will not necessarily have a visual component to go with it, but what it does have is really long and intricate explorations.

"Social media platforms also have different guidelines when posting about these topics, with communities like Reddit actually self-regulating when it comes to this topic. A lot of work goes into making sure that serial killers aren't glorified in some of these communities.

"So even though people are engaging with the topic of serial killers more, it doesn't necessarily mean that they are celebretising these people. I think what it actually means is that people are working through complex ideas more as a social process."

Dr. Glitsos noted that statistically, most of us will never interact with a serial killer "face-to-face."

"Our entire relationship with this character is therefore mediated, from the way newspapers reported on Jack The Ripper and [television news](#) covered Charles Manson, to today's endless retelling of serial killer stories in Netflix documentaries.

"The serial killer, time and time again, proves to be an enigmatic figure, particularly produced by the mass media of its time, available for us to act out and cope with our anxieties about what it is to be human, yet also reproducing us as inhuman cogs of the machine of mass society, industry, and culture."

More information: Laura Glitsos et al, Serial killers and the production of the uncanny in digital participatory culture, *New Media & Society* (2024). [DOI: 10.1177/14614448241253764](https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448241253764)

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