

Media Representation of Female Serial Killers (FSK): A Conceptual review

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Abstract

Like male serial killers, Female serial killers (FSK) are the killers who have committed three murders in the last 30 days. Usually, the concept of FSK seems a bit vague as it does not suit the gender role of females in society. Yet, some evidence supports this claim that women serial killers exist but are not given equal amounts of attention as their opposite gender. This conceptual paper discusses Female Serial killers (FSK), their media coverage, and how they differ from Male serial killers (MSK).

Keywords: Serial Killer, Gender Role, Attention, Committed, FSK, Evidence.

1. Introduction

In various parts of the world, women have been oppressed by the patriarchal system for centuries. At the same time, this oppression can also be found in the media, where males have marginalized women. For a long time, our culture and popular media have constantly denied that women can express any aggressive attitude as it does not contradict society's "too fragile" image. Opposed to them, their male counterparts have been stealing all the media's attention regarding crimes like serial killings.

The World Health Organization estimates that over their lifetime, 1 in every 3 women, or approximately 736 million, experience physical or sexual abuse at the hands of an intimate partner. Additionally, studies have shown that the media consistently portrays violent crimes with a gender bias. Even while previous research has looked into the connection between violent media exposure and violent crime, much hasn't been done to objectively analyze the

link between particular violent media exposure and the commission of intimate partner violence.

Although the depiction of gender across a variety of media platforms remains a central focus of content analytic inquiry, the last comprehensive, peer-reviewed analysis of gender on primetime television stems from a sample of programming that is more than 15 years old (Signorielli & Bacue, 1999). Certainly, the television landscape will likely change dramatically since *Seinfeld* and *Dawson's Creek*. Yet the contemporary status of gender characterizations on primetime TV is, regrettably, undocumented. The current investigation addresses this gap by examining depictions of gender in modern primetime television.

To this end, the present study was guided by existing content analyses of gender differences in the media and by insights from prominent media effects theories (Sink & Mastro, 2016). Overall, it is clear that the patriarchal system continues to significantly impact how women are perceived and treated in society, and media coverage of violent crimes is just one example of this. More work must challenge these harmful attitudes and promote gender equality.

To address the issue of gender-based violence and discrimination, there is a need for a comprehensive approach that involves addressing the root causes of oppression, promoting gender equality, and providing support and resources for women who have experienced violence or discrimination. This includes changes in policies and laws, such as ensuring equal pay, increasing representation in leadership positions, and providing access to mental health services and support for survivors of violence. It also involves challenging harmful gender norms and biases through education and media representation.

1.1 Media Coverage

Even when FSKs receive media attention, they are portrayed as victims of their circumstances or passive subordinates to a possibly still sizeable male companion. Overall, newspapers from 1900 to 2013 frame female serial murders to reflect American patriarchal values and norms. According to this, it is not socially acceptable for females, particularly mothers (Pozzan, 2014).

Vronsky's statistics have nullified this concept. The statistics state that since 1820 nearly one in every six (16%) serial killers were females. Moreover, stats also show that 53 per cent of female serial killers murdered at least one adult female and 32 per cent at least one female child. These female killers are accompanied by a male or female offender or act alone.

There was a popular idea in the past that the victims of female serial killers are either their family members or male intimates. In contrast, recent data shows female serial killers have shifted to strangers as their victims (Vronsky, 2007).

1.2 Stephen Griffiths and Joanna Dennehy

As discussed earlier, male and female serial killers have been portrayed differently in the media. A study has compared their coverage in broadsheet and tabloid newspapers. Two case studies, one male and one female, were chosen to understand the issue better. Thematic analysis has been used to compare Joanna Dennehy and Stephan Griffiths in selecting articles from national newspapers. During this analysis, a few repeating themes came forward, such as themes of 'labelling' and 'blaming others.' 'Labelling' is subdivided into mental illness' and sexualization and dehumanization subthemes.

A deep analysis of these themes revealed that the gender of the Killer strongly impacts how they are being represented in tabloid newspapers. This statement is true to some extent for broadsheet newspapers too. Joanna Dennehy is described as mentally ill despite committing similar acts, whereas Stephen Griffiths is not. This biased representation has been seen more in tabloid newspapers. The specific theme of "sexualization and dehumanization" portrays how tabloid newspapers sexualize Joanna Dennehy instead of Griffiths. Tabloid newspapers have been more biased and discussed due to their years of female sexualization in men's magazines. These findings are in common with the study of previous literature that examines how females have been portrayed sexually and dehumanized in a patriarchal society, even as killers too (O'Donnell, 2016).

1.3 Monikers (Nicknames) Used

Harrison et al. (2015) made another startling discovery that the monikers used by the police and media for FSKs frequently highlighted that the Killer was female. Rather than the brutality of the crime, it has been done primarily to reduce the effect of danger surrounding them. The monikers used for FSKs are 'Lady Bluebeard,' 'Death Row Granny,' and 'The Giggling Grandma.' That shows how unevidenced those crimes would be if a granny or fragile woman were committed.

As opposed to it, monikers used for Male Serial killers portray the act's brutality. These monikers are 'The Forces of Evil,' 'The Brooklyn Strangler,' 'The Classified Ad Rapist,' and 'The Warwick Slasher.' To summarise this discussion, FSKs are not immune to being reduced to fit the patriarchal expectations of serial murder. Yet they are still forced to fit into the definition of 'female criminals' carefully constructed gender expectations to be recognized (Harrison et al., 2015).

1.4 Female Serial Killers (FSK) in Movies

The increased popularity of crime-based movies and crime programs also portrays the audience's interest. Moreover, studies have proved how these fictional programs shape public views and opinions. This statement is especially true for the fictionally based perception of women in crime and criminal justice processes. Thus, it won't be wrong to say that these fictional programs have real-life consequences.

Scholars and the public are usually aware that these fictional portrayals of women in criminal justice programs are not always true but somewhat stereotypical and exaggerated. Nevertheless, these portrayals showcase the general cultural perception of women as either offenders or victims or primarily professionals. The female's desires for the crime usually inspire the portrayal of Female offenders. At the same time, female victims are presented with victimhood experiences that provoke the viewers to criticize them. Lastly, female criminal justice professionals are viewed as less qualified for the jobs than males. While usually, they still represent the traditionally feminine traits of nurturing and their sexualized behaviour (Rodenhizer & MacPherson, 2019).

Despite its rarity, serial murder has captured the public's attention. This fascination is reflected in the popularity of various forms of entertainment media, particularly films about serial murder. The current study examines the content of 38 films that depict acts of female-perpetrated serial murder to determine what information the public can glean from films about female serial murder. Male serial killers have received much academic and media attention, but their female counterparts have been largely ignored or treated less seriously, despite committing equally heinous crimes.

Therefore, a study has been done to determine how accurately female serial murder is represented in film. The data has been collected from the Radford University/Florida Gulf Coast University Serial Killer Database. In addition, the characteristics of female serial killers (n=38) and their victims (n=209) in the films are compared to real-world female serial murder data. This study shows that films misrepresent female serial murderers in various ways, including their motivations and methods of murder; however, the movie does portray certain aspects of female serial murder correctly, such as victim characteristics (Call, 2021).

1.5 Fictional Vs. Crime Programs

The representation of female killers in both made-up and real-life crime shows was examined in Lima's 2014 study. The goal of the study was to ascertain whether or not women were portrayed favourably or unfavourably, and whether these representations were accurate. The study also attempted to assess the authenticity of fictitious versus real crime shows. The findings demonstrated that, despite not being totally realistic, real-life crime programs more accurately depicted female killers than fictional ones. Understanding society's perspective of women criminals and the steps required to modify how the media portrays this crime are both dependent on an examination of these portrayals.

2. Eric Hickey's 1985 Study

While discussing the existence of female serial killers, the work of Eric Hickey holds an important place in this regard. Eric Hickey, a criminologist in 1985, published his first academic paper on female serial killers. Even though there has been past research on female serial murderers, Hickey

invalidates this assumption by encountering many female serial killers while examining serial murders in the past 50 years.

In 1991, Hickey investigated 34 female serial killers. He found that since 1900, in 82% of cases, the female murderer has been accompanied by a male counterpart. It has also been noted that 1970 was when more than one-third of the women began their killing careers, even though Hickey offered several explanations for this apparent occurrence: Improved police investigation, population increase, and increased media attention. Yet it should also be put in focus. That usually marked the era of the second wave of feminism. When women focused on gaining equality and other demands, their concept of equality traditionally revolved around the view that women could do all those men could do. Like women can do heavy jobs, they can earn and live like men.

As a result of that movement, many women entered the workforce. Thus, among many other men-like attributes, women also joined in killing careers. Hickey further discussed the time of female serial killers, which revolved around 9.2 years before they stopped killing. One in five killers was found to have no occupational title and had an average age of 33 when they began their killing careers. Discussing their ethnicity, ninety-seven per cent were white.

2.1 Historical Evidence (Elizabeth Bathory)

Hickey's subsequent work has examined cases that show the existence of Female serial killers have always existed, but no one ever acknowledged them. The proof of their existence has been found since 1800 and even long before that. One of the prominent examples of their historical existence can be Elizabeth Bathory in the 16th century. A Hungarian countess indicates killing and torturing and killing hundreds of young girls. The number of her killings may vary, but the proof is enough to support the claim that Female Serial Killers have always been there.

Their existence and methods of killing may differ, but they are still responsible for such mass killings without any important reason. Such examples also divert our attention toward the status quo of such killers. Elizabeth Bathory could only commit such mass killings because she was a

Hungarian countess. A noble who has the power to stay behind the curtains after committing such hideous crimes. This kind of discussion must also be put under the light of research. The case of Elizabeth Bathory shows no specific reason for this mass killing and no severer punishment on her account, even after the accusation.

3. Why Do Serial Killers Kill?

According to this study, serial killer kills due to physical abuse, drug abuse, and early exposure to alcohol addiction. Brain injury and mental illness play an important role as well. Serial killer comes from all walks of life and is usually abused nearby their parents and someone from their childhood. These signs are frequently seen, but they lack knowledge and resources from their family. Hence, such symptoms go unnoticed. They are usually discovered only after committing a crime or murder, which is too late. Serial killers aren't concerned with how society perceives them. Sexually abusing and killing victims would provide them the same fun and excitement as striking a home run or rejoicing on a wedding anniversary (Gillette, 2019).

3.1 Sociopathic and Psychopathic Tendencies

A history of abuse and violence is one of the most common causes of sociopathic and psychopathic tendencies. Surprisingly, this theory was thought to apply only to MSKs. Keeney and Heide (1994) conducted a study researching fourteen FSKs using mass media reports. A preliminary profile of female serial murderers was then compared to what was known about male serial murderers at the time. The evidence shows that most such suspects have been diagnosed with psychological disorders. The similarities have been found in child abuse, broken families, ethnicity (race), occupation, and education level.

According to a similar study conducted by those mentioned earlier, five of the eight FSKs reported sexual and/or physical abuse. Furthermore, Frei et al. (2006) reported no abuse history but childhood neglect and maltreatment in a case study. Due to the small sample sizes, it would be difficult to generalize these findings, but they do lend credence to the fact that most FSKs experience some form of dysfunction, prompting the study.

Even though abuse and baggage of past violence play a major role in psychopathic tendencies, research still needs to represent the systematic analysis of why women murder serially. First, the existing literature points out their abusive partners. Then, fearing for their lives, they would murder the culprits. Literature showed little to no attention to this aspect of female homicide behaviour. Yet one and not neglect the other factor or their motives, usually to gain financial gain.

3.2 Types of FSKs

At this point, it has been cleared those Female serial killers exist. Now it is also important to find out their types too. There are "visionary," "comfort," "hedonistic," and "power seekers" serial killers. Visionary serial killers kill in response to their psychological gain as they lose touch with reality. While comfort, a serial killer's motive is wholly worldly, and that is financial gain. Other than visionary and comfort serial killers. There are the ones known as hedonistic killers. These types of female serial killers are the least to be found. These killers share a special relationship between their sexual satisfaction and deadly violence as killing becomes fun. Lastly, the power-seekers killers enhance their self-esteem by dominating other lives. They exercise their power by playing the game of life and death against others. Even discussing the four types of killers, some investigation is still required of female killers.

- Who kill under the influence of charismatic leaders.
- Women who were killed for financial reasons
- Most importantly, the one dealing with antisocial personality and psychopathology (Holmes et al., 1991).

3.3 Women as Quiet Killers

While investigating, it has also been seen that female serial killers often avoid arrest for their unusual killing pattern. They have been able to avoid arrest and have also successfully covered the number of murders they have committed. Such female serial killers are frequently referred to as "quiet" killers. Their way of killing is either poison or suffocation, unlike the traditional knives and guns. Comparing female and male serial killers shows clear differences in their killing patterns. Some of the characteristics of female

serial killers are as follows. First, FSK does not torture their victim or butcher them like male serial killers (Keeney & Heide, 1994).

According to the study, the popular choice of weapons for women is usually poisonous compared to guns for men (Harrison et al., 2015; Keeney & Heide, 1994). Third, the location of their killing is mostly homes or at work, which drives less attention. Unlike women, male serial killers' methods and locations are random and far-flung sprees. While lastly, one of the interesting characteristics of female serial killers has been penned down by Sociologist Amanda Farrell in a 2013 paper. She analysed that the time female serial killers kill their victims is longer than that of male serial killers.

4. Motives and Methods

In previous paragraphs, we discussed how male and female serial killers vary in their killing methods. One of the distinguishing characteristics of this opposite gender is their motive to kill. It has been seen that 75 per cent of male serial killers kill for sexual pleasure. Whereas it is not the case with female serial killers, 52 per cent of FSKs' motive to kill is financed. According to Marissa Harrison, an evolutionary psychologist at Penn State Harrisburg, their motivation is "definitely money" (Harrison, 2016). Examples of male serial killers are the infamous John Wayne Gacy, Ted Bundy (the handsome Serial Killer), and Jeffery Dahmer. These serial killers' motive was not only to gain sexual pleasure but can also be referred to as power seekers as they would also practice their control over their victims.

As Marissa Harrison mentioned, the motive of female serial killers. She also mentioned the case of Amy Archer-Gilligan. The investigation done in her case found that she used to run a Connecticut nursing home in the early twentieth century. She killed many elderly clients using arsenic poison while marrying some. The motive was to become the benefactor of their wills. Another example of such a female serial killer is the one who is named *Angel of Death* (used to kill those under her care) or *Black Widow* (who kills spouses, relatives, and friends) (Davison, 2004) - examples as mentioned earlier directly resonated with Hickey's research that 32 per cent of these female serial killers were housewives.

In comparison, 18 per cent were nurses or others involved in other types of criminal careers (15%). This stat also highlights that even having

nurturing careers, they could still attempt inhumane acts. Maybe there is no direct relationship, but this still needs further investigation. Harrison and her colleague further investigation confirmed that women are more prone to kill people they are associated with. Even Farrell Aliman that 80 per cent of female serial killers know their victims by using the same stereotypical method of poisoning and asphyxiation. This data was taken from 55 offenders of both genders in 2019, showing a clear distinction between the motive and method of both sexes.

5. Evolutionary Psychology Explanation

Harrison's investigation moved further to understand the distinction of methods for both sexes in the context of evolutionary psychology. She believes its origins can be traced back to our prehistoric hunter-gatherer ancestors. That is how humans adapted to their environment by dividing the evolutionary roles in that era. And how these roles helped them survive and pass these genes on to their descendants.

5.1. Method: Hunter and Gather

Since the stone age, it has been seen that men would hunt down the food while women would gather. These divisions of labour can be found in modern modes of killing and are by-products of this legacy. As discussed earlier, women chose to kill either at home or the workplace as this behaviour reciprocates the gathering behaviour of our ancestral forefathers. At the same time, men would stalk their victims and hunt them down after learning about their behaviour and social network. This also reciprocates the historical hunting of animals. While this may explain why males are more likely to commit violence, it falls short on an individual level and places too much emphasis on economic motivations.

Furthermore, it assumes that our forefathers had a clear sex-based division of labour. This may or may not be the case; despite popular belief that men were the primary hunters and women were the primary gatherers, an examination of modern hunter-gatherer societies reveals that this distinction isn't always explicit and may not have been historical. Men can be caregivers, and women can be hunters, and historically, the assumption that they cannot be both may not be correct. Extending this criticism to Harrison's explanation,

we know that motives vary greatly and that only a small percentage of these murders are economically motivated. Hence, both sexes are guilty of economically motivated murder. Is it possible that we unintentionally socialize males to be more aggressive? (Kozłowska, 2019).

5.2. Motive: Reproductive Self-Interest Or Social Norms

Harrison took aid from evolutionary psychology and helped us understand the methods of male and female serial killing. Robert Trivedi also relies on evolutionary psychology to understand their motivation for killing serially. He emphasized that motivation directly relates to the opposite gender's mating behaviour. Males who are abundant in the supply of sperm enjoy multiple mating opportunities. In contrast, females rely on one stable partner due to the limited ova. This theory can be directly linked to males' and females' killing motivations: financial stability and sexual pleasure (Trivers, 1972).

The explanation of the motive and methods of serial killers through evolutionary psychology is limited to why a man would kill his wife who bears his children. Or why would a mother kill her children? Other than evolutionary psychology, Harrison tends to rely more on the gender norms of men and women. That is, men are aggressive, and women are passive. These gender norms that have existed for centuries can be a robust basis for explaining these behaviors.

6. Equally Lethal

When asked about serial killers. A normal mind would jump to a white male. An ugly guy with past traumas makes him a killer to achieve sexual gratification. This idea and view of serial killers have been limited to only male societal entities. At the same time, researchers Leyton and Skrapek want a more in-depth study on this topic without any hypothesis or preconceived assumptions. Even serial killers' motivations to kill vary due to past experiences and background, so one cannot generalize a specific experience. Thus, this observation is difficult to quantify (Sharma, 2018). However, they have already built idea not only challenges the rare existence of female serial killers. But it also talks about the nature of killers. Such that only males are lethal killers as opposed to females.

While examining the case of Aileen Wuornos, researchers, and the criminal justice system, for the first time, faced the lethality of female serial killers. As she cold-bloodedly shot seven men at point-blank range. She was a serial offender who was a calculated murderer. Researchers linked the attachment theory to her predatory aggression to investigate her case. The case of Aileen Wuornos was intriguing enough to conduct further research on women's predatory serial killing and psychopathy (Arrigo & Gryphon, 2004).

7. Conclusion

The debate of female serial killers brought out some of their distinctive traits and motivations. It is important to remember that the victim was killed regardless of the killer's gender. Even while there are strong examples of female serial killers, such as "Jolly" Jane Toppan and "The Giggling Granny," they frequently go by comical or uninspiring nicknames in contrast to male serial killers like Jack the Ripper or the BTK Killer. This claim could come across as sexist or misogynistic, but it is based on truth and deserves deeper investigation.

Due to stereotypes that women are less violent and less likely to commit such crimes, society frequently downplays the possibility of female serial killers. Women are just as capable of perpetrating such horrible crimes as men; thus, it is fatally mistaken to be reluctant to embrace the thought of female serial killers. According to the statement, "women have a unique ability to get away with murder because they're not seen as violent." Female serial killers have a distinct edge over their male counterparts in that they can avoid detection and remain undetected for prolonged periods of time.

To better comprehend the phenomena, it is essential to carry out more in-depth research and analysis on female serial killers. With the aid of this research, we will be able to better understand the underlying causes of women's risk-taking behaviour and develop effective preventative and intervention techniques. In order to address the problem, society must acknowledge that women are just as capable of killing as males. No matter if they are men or women, serial killers are an endless source of ghoulish intrigue and dismal speculation, according to Harold Schechter. However, they are also an awful reality.

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