

A Theoretical Approach on the Monikers of Serial Killers

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The fascination and newfound obsession surrounding true crime media carries an attractive interest in dubbing a serial killer with a moniker that mirrors their murderous characteristics, public perception, or geographical location. On the opposite side of this phenomenon, there exists a culture where only the best-selling, and most attention-grabbing, nickname must be swiftly chosen, publicized, and capitalized on in an instance. A basic question that requires further exploration in the field of academia is an in-depth study on the monikers of serial killers: why are monikers used? This subject matter is often overlooked, or forgotten entirely, in the eyes of the public and literature, but it is one that could possibly answer how to move forward when discussing serial killers or mass murderers. This honors capstone intends to identify and measure the true purpose of the connection between serial killers and monikers, specifically searching for a sense of dissociation between the nickname and the person.

Significance

Nicknames are a form of communication that allows for connection on a more personal, or professional, level and creates a sense of community around a person, place, or subject; additionally, nicknames contain the ability to lessen the barrier between people who appear so far out of reach. Criminal monikers allow one to maintain identity, live up to their implications, and remind them of the reputation one must hold in the criminal subculture (Maurer & Futrell, 1982). The moniker for serial offenders presents deeper than simply a name, one of a status symbol for the worst type of crime, and it is permanently engraved in the minds of all the true crime fanatics who idolize these criminals. When thinking of a serial killer, such as the individual who viciously shot six people and injured several more in the Bronx, New York, by claiming a satanically possessed dog barked commands telling him to kill (Irons, 2021), does one think of the self-

invented “Son of Sam” or the birth name David Berkowitz? When taking a deeper glance at what is truly known about a serial killer, one can easily identify the notable nickname, even oftentimes remember horrific details of the crimes committed, yet the given name of the individual is often pushed aside.

The satanist Richard Ramirez, nicknamed the “Night Stalker”, carried multiple failed nicknames such as “Valley Intruder” and “Walk-in Killer” for his tendency to break into the homes of those in Los Angeles to rape, burglarize, and murder the occupants (Wiest, 2003). It was key for the media to conjure a nickname that personified Ramirez’s crimes in a way that pushed terror and fear to the public. For certain situations, such as the case of “Jack the Ripper” where no known identity of the serial killer exists, a moniker may be understandable, yet one that is purposely shocking and catchy is unnecessary and not beneficial to catching the murderer. Whether chosen by the serial killer themselves, or provided by the public, the usage of the moniker pushes their agenda into the mainstream media.

Monikers hold more power over the public than most realize, and in the case of serial killers, the nickname can either make or break them in terms of popularity. The power of a nickname can lead to one demystifying, or lessening, the crimes as in the case of female serial killers, or lead to the almost opposite reaction (Wilkins, 2004). Male serial killers are routinely dubbed with a frightening moniker that exacerbates their crimes and ensures the nickname lives in notoriety; however, female serial killers often do not have a specific moniker attached to them that force them to be remembered in such a way (Wilkins, 2004). The monikers are important in

shaping the public perception of a serial murderer, but it is unconfirmed if they are potentially useful in creating a true identity for the killer.

These public perceptions soon turn into the need for a story, something to explain in detail what occurred without feeling too close to the subject, and this is where the monikers truly come into play. Providing a nickname to a serial killer shields them from being a genuine monster who committed multiple murders; instead, they become characters in a story that did not actually hurt the viewer, making the crimes they committed less reality and more fiction (Wiest, 2003). Knowing why these nicknames exist and what place they are coming from may be beneficial in understanding how to approach the subject of criminal monikers in the future, combined with the possibility of persuading the public away from romanticizing the most dangerous individuals in society.

Literature Review

There are great similarities, and slight differences, between the definitions of legitimate nicknames and monikers in the dominant culture, but monikers carry a psychological, sociological, and linguistical importance in the criminal underworld (Maurer & Futrell, 1982). The controversy existing within this culture questions whether giving a serial killer a nickname is appropriate given the circumstances, and it leaves open an area for debate on whether the public or the killer is the one who desires a moniker. Sociologist Jack Levin believes serial killers strive for the notorious name they expect to be given as it ensures their evil deeds are forever embedded within society's collective memory, essentially saying their moniker creates a household name (Levin, 2008). While there are only a select few who lean towards serial killers committing acts with the intention

of securing a nickname, the majority perception views the media as the sole perpetrator of this concept.

The media holds responsibility for the portrayal of serial killers as it holds the greatest impact on shaping public perception. Majer (2023) suggests that providing murderers with such glorified nicknames may sensationalize their crimes and lessen the seriousness of their actions, so it is crucial to remember that the reality of these individuals is more complex than the nickname insinuates. It is often the media that plays a significant role in manufacturing a moniker for headline purposes, and the media is usually the single factor in whether the nickname sticks. An analytical review of *The New York Times* found that it was easier to find information and headlines on serial killers using their nicknames rather than their birth names; furthermore, within the articles found, a moniker was used over half of the time compared to their real names within headlines (Wiest, 2003). Tagging a serial killer with a captivating moniker benefits the media in several aspects, yet the impact of what the nickname means to the killer, or the public, is not fully understood.

An area that is even more untouched by scientific research regarding serial killers and monikers is that of the female serial murderer. Although female serial killing is rare, it still occurs and is often dismissed in the eyes of the public. One would think that, similar to male serial killers, females would be dubbed with a moniker that captures the significance of their vicious crimes; however, this does not appear to be the case as female nicknames differ greatly. With males, the media chooses nicknames that emphasize the evilness, or atrocity, of the criminal, but for female offenders, the monikers are commonly neutral or minimizing in connection with their criminal

actions (Wilkins, 2004). Additionally, there does not seem to be such significant importance placed on attaching a nickname to female serial killers as there are few, if any, instances where one singular moniker can be attributed to a female serial murderer (Wilkins, 2004).

Methodology

This capstone project utilized an electronic survey conducted via Qualtrics to assess the beliefs of the public on various questions regarding perceptions on serial killer monikers. A survey format was in the best interest of this capstone as scholarly literature lacks a consensus on why monikers are frequently used in the media, and it was a widely available format intended reach a large audience of respondents and his or her personal thoughts on the topic. The survey was efficient in obtaining information from respondents on the assumptions provided above, along with other questions that identify multiple aspects of monikers. The survey consisted of 20 total questions, 17 related to monikers of serial killers and three directed towards demographics. The complete list of survey questions is provided in the Appendix. Each question had multiple choice options, including an I do not know option, to allow respondents an opportunity to choose an answer that best aligns with their views.

The survey progressed through IRB protocol and obtained approval from Radford University's IRB review board. Following approval, the survey was distributed to three criminal justice courses, taught by Dr. Elis, and publicly posted on Facebook for a larger population sample. The survey was available for approximately one month on my personal Facebook page and posted on student's D2L course page. The population sample included 126 respondents. Once the survey was closed, the data was analyzed through descriptive and bivariate statistics. Contingency

analysis was utilized to examine the relationship between demographic characteristics and perceptions of monikers. This capstone was also presented at the Honors Capstone Showcase.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive statistics for gender, age, ethnicity, and each question on monikers are provided in Table 1. Eighty percent of the sample was female, eighty-two percent was white, and fifty-one percent of the sample was between the ages of 18 and 24. To the first question, “do you often see the use of serial killer monikers in the media (social media, news media, television, etc.)?”, the majority of respondents reported they often or occasionally see monikers in any form of media (47% and 42% respectively). Sixty-four percent of respondents believed they are more likely to remember the moniker of a serial killer rather than the birth name.

As mentioned above, one intention of this project was to assess the knowledge of female serial killers and their monikers, or the lack thereof. There is a lack of literature that addresses serial killer monikers, and there is even less research that focuses on female serial killer monikers. Although female serial killers may be minimal in numbers, how they are assigned monikers differs from males. These findings are consistent with those noted in the literature review. Fifty-eight percent of respondents were not familiar with any monikers for female serial killers, and 19% did not know if they were aware of any female serial killer monikers. Sixty-three percent of the sample believed that there are differences in the way male and female serial killers were assigned monikers while only 7% did not believe those differences existed. However, 25% were unable to identify if they were aware of differences in female and male serial killer monikers.

Table 1

Description	Number	Percentage
Gender	#	%
Female	100	80
Male	25	20
Non-binary/Third gender	1	1
Age	#	%
18 – 24	64	51
25 – 34	20	16
35 – 44	16	13
45 – 54	14	11
55 – 64	7	6
65+	5	4
Ethnicity	#	%
White/Caucasian	108	86
African American	3	2
Hispanic or Latino	9	7
Asian	2	2
Two or more	3	2
Prefer not to say	1	1
Q1: How Often Monikers Appear in Media	#	%
Often	59	47
Occasionally	53	42
Never	9	7
Do Not Know	5	4
Q2: More Likely to Remember Moniker/ Birth Name	#	%
Remember Moniker	81	64
Remember Birth Name	16	13
Remember Equally	22	17
Do Not Know	7	6
Q3: Familiarity with Moniker or Birth Name	#	%
More Familiar with Moniker	77	61
More Familiar with Birth Name	24	19
Familiar with Equal	21	17
Neither	4	3
Q4: Birth Name or Moniker More Common in Media	#	%
Monikers More Common in Media	87	69

Birth Names More Common in Media	11	9
Equally Common in Media	22	17
Do Not Know	6	5
Q5: Familiarity with Female Monikers	#	%
Yes	29	23
No	73	58
Do Not Know	24	19
Q6: Female/Male Moniker Differences	#	%
Yes, there are differences	80	63
No, there are not differences	9	7
They are equal	5	4
Do Not Know	32	25
Q7: Interaction with Disturbing Moniker	#	%
Yes, more likely to interact	70	56
No, not more likely to interact	36	29
Do Not Know	20	16
Q8: Interaction with Pleasant Moniker	#	%
Yes, more likely to interact	34	27
No, not more likely to interact	65	52
Do Not Know	27	21
Q9: Disturbing Moniker & Perception	#	%
Yes, disturbing moniker impacts perception	117	94
No, disturbing moniker does not impact perception	4	3
Do Not Know	4	3
Q10: Catchy Monikers & Perception	#	%
Yes, catchy monikers impact perception	113	90
No, catchy monikers do not impact perception	4	3
Do Not Know	9	7
Q11: Monikers Glamorize/Idolize Killers	#	%

Yes, monikers glamorize/idolize killers	78	62
No, monikers do not glamorize/idolize killers	33	26
Do Not Know	15	12
Q12: Monikers & Celebrity Status	#	%
Yes, monikers create celebrity status	102	81
No, monikers do not create celebrity status	16	13
Do Not Know	8	6
Q13: Monikers Disconnect Killer from Crime	#	%
Yes, monikers create disconnection	61	48
No, monikers do not create disconnection	49	39
Do Not Know	16	13
Q14: Monikers Create True Crime Appeal	#	%
Yes, monikers create true crime appeal	94	75
No, monikers do not create true crime appeal	22	17
Do Not Know	10	8
Q15: Monikers Ethically/Morally Acceptable	#	%
Both morally and ethically acceptable	28	22
Neither morally nor ethically acceptable	37	30
Only morally acceptable	12	10
Only ethically acceptable	11	9
Do Not Know	37	30
Q16: Unidentified Serial Killers & Monikers	#	%
Yes, monikers are acceptable	96	76
No, monikers are not acceptable	18	14
Do Not Know	12	10
Q17: Opinion- Media Use of Monikers	#	%
Monikers create sense of dissociation	42	33
Monikers represent status in society	8	6
Monikers allow public sense of fiction	37	29

Monikers are headlines for attention	108	86
Monikers are easier to recognize	56	44
Monikers are only used for identification purposes	6	5
Other	5	4

A series of questions also examined the type of connotations that a moniker has and its effects on public perceptions. Question seven asked “do you feel you are more likely to interact with media that has a disturbing moniker for serial killers (e.g. The Night Stalker, Boston Strangler, Torture Doctor, etc.)?”. Fifty-six percent of participants agreed they are more likely to interact with media that contains a disturbing moniker, and 29% disagreed with being more likely to interact with disturbing monikers. When asked a similar question about interaction with pleasant, less frightening, monikers for serial killers (e.g. Barbie and Ken killers, Angel of Death, Dating Game killer, etc.), only 27% agreed that they are more likely to interact with this type of moniker. Twenty-one percent were unable to decide if they were more likely to interact with a pleasant, less frightening moniker.

Two questions addressed how disturbing, eerie, or mysterious monikers, as well as catchy or entertaining monikers, may have an impact on their perception. An overwhelming 94% of respondents agreed that disturbing monikers influence public perceptions. On the other hand, 90% of respondents agreed that a catchy or entertaining moniker also has an impact on how the public perceives serial killers. Most participants, 62%, responded that they believe monikers are used to glamorize or idolize the serial killer and the crimes they committed. The majority of respondents

(81%) believe that serial killer monikers place them into a celebrity status to the public, while 13% disagreed with that statement.

Another question gauged if respondents believed that monikers allow the public to disconnect the serial killers from the crimes, and there were 48% who agreed, 39% who disagreed, and 13% who did not know. One of the final questions inquired how respondents feel about the morality and ethics of serial killer monikers considering the nature of their crimes. Thirty percent of respondents do not believe it is morally or ethically acceptable to use monikers, which is equal to respondents who did not know. Ten percent believe monikers are morally, but not ethically, acceptable, and nine percent believe they are ethically, but not morally, acceptable. The remaining percentage felt that it is both morally and ethically acceptable.

The final question asked about the personal opinion of respondents on why the media prefers to use the monikers of serial killers. Several options were provided for respondents, and they also had the opportunity to specify their beliefs. Five percent of respondents believed the only purpose for a moniker was to identify serial killers, and 6% percent believed it is because monikers represent their status in society. Twenty-nine percent believed it is because the monikers allow for to public to feel a sense of fiction in the story, 33% believed it is due to the fact that monikers create a sense of dissociation between the killer and crime, and the majority (86%) believed it is because the media needs to utilize an attention-grabbing headline. One respondent wrote that they do believe it is for identification purposes as an opportunity to put a name to what happened, and it categorizes how people would view the serial killer. Another individual responded that media outlets may not want to give the serial killer more notoriety by using their birth name.

Bivariate Relationships

Contingency tables were utilized to examine the relationships between demographic characteristics and questions regarding serial killer monikers. The following tables present only the significant relationships between demographic characteristics and questions regarding monikers for serial killers. There was only one individual in the non-binary/third gender category, so there was no determination of true statistical significance. As Table 2 illustrates, there were only two significant relationships between respondent gender and questions tapping into serial killer monikers.

Table 2

Q2: Remember Moniker or Birth Name	Female	Male
Remember Moniker	70.7%	40%
Remember Birth Name	11.1%	20%
Remember them Equally	14.1%	32%
Do Not Know	4.0%	8%
P < 0.05		
Q5: Familiarity with Female Monikers	Female	Male
Yes	21.2%	32%
No	63.6%	36%
Do Not Know	15.2%	32%
P < 0.05		

For question two, females are notably more likely than males to remember the moniker compared to the birth name of serial killers. Males are closer in percentage to being more likely to remember the birth name and remembering each equally than they are to remembering the moniker of a serial killer. Although they are in close percentage, females are less likely than males to choose

they do not know as an answer to which they are more likely to remember. Females are more likely to remember the birth name and the moniker equally compared to remembering the birth name alone. Males are close in range to each of the answer choices provided, while females appeared to be geared towards remembering the moniker rather than the birth name compared to any available option.

Regarding question five, respondents were asked about their familiarity of female monikers. Compared to females, males are more likely to be familiar with any monikers for female serial killers. Although males are more likely than females, the majority of males are also unfamiliar with female monikers. Females are significantly more likely to respond “no” to being familiar with any female monikers rather than males. There was a sizable difference between females and males who responded that they did not know if they were familiar with any female monikers for serial killers. Female response rates to all three answer choices are more scattered while male responses are relatively close in percentages.

Table 3

Q5: Familiarity with Female Monikers	18- 24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Yes	10.9%	45%	18.8%	57.1%	0%	40%
No	60.9%	55%	68.8%	42.9%	57.1%	40%
Do Not Know	28.1%	0%	12.5%	0%	42.9%	20%
P < 0.05						
Q10: Catchy Moniker & Perception	18- 24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Yes, catchy monikers have an impact	92.2%	100%	87.5%	78.6%	57.1%	100%
No, catchy monikers don't have an impact	1.6%	0%	0%	14.3%	14.3%	0%
Do Not Know	6.3%	0%	12.5%	7.1%	28.6%	0%
P < 0.05						

Q13: Disconnect Killer from Crime	18- 24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Yes, monikers create disconnection	62.5%	60%	25%	28.6%	14.3%	0%
No, monikers don't create disconnection	25%	30%	68.8%	64.3%	28.6%	100%
Do Not Know	12.5%	10%	6.3%	7.1%	57.1%	0%
P < 0.05						
Q14: Monikers Create True Crime Appeal	18- 24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Yes, monikers create media appeal	84.4%	50%	62.5%	85.7%	57.1%	80%
No, monikers don't create media appeal	9.4%	45%	25%	7.1%	14.3%	20%
Do Not Know	6.3%	5%	12.5%	7.1%	28.6%	0%
P < 0.05						

Table 3 presents the four questions which were statistically significant in terms of age range. For question five, ages 45 to 54 are the most likely to be familiar with monikers for any female serial killers. Ages 18 to 24 and 55 to 64 are in the lowest percentages of knowledge on female monikers. The age range 35 to 44 are the highest percentage of responding “no” to being familiar with any female serial killer monikers, and 18- to 24-year-olds are a close second to having no familiarity with female monikers. Individuals 65 and older had equal percentages for the answer choices “yes” and “no”. There are zero 55- to 64-year-olds who are aware of any female monikers for serial killers.

For catchy monikers and perception, the entire set of respondents for ages 25 to 34 and 65 and older agreed catchy monikers have an impact on how they are perceived. The age range 55 to 64 are the least likely to agree that catchy monikers in the media impacts their perception in the media. Individuals in the entire range of 45 to 64 are equal in percentage and opinion that catchy monikers do not impact media perception. Those in the 55 to 64 age category maintained the

highest percentage of responding they do not know their opinion on this question. Individuals aged 18 to 24 are more likely to respond to not knowing if catchy monikers impact how serial killers are perceived rather than deciding they did not have an impact.

Question 13 assessed if monikers are utilized to disconnect the serial killer from the crimes they commit. Those who are 65 and older fully agreed that monikers do not create any form of disconnection between the crime and the person. 18- to 34-year-olds are extremely close in percentage on choosing that monikers do create some type of disconnection. The age category 55 to 64 is the least likely to agree with the statement that monikers create disconnection from the person and the crimes that were committed. Compared to all other options, ages 55 to 64 are also the highest percentage to choose they did not know their opinion on the question.

Concerning question 14, respondents were asked if monikers are the reason why true crime is so appealing to viewers. The majority of 18 to 24, 45 to 54, and 65 and older respondents did agree that monikers create some form of appeal in true crime media. Other than 55- to 64-year-olds, most respondents are least likely to respond they did not know the answer to this question. Individuals aged 25 to 34 are the most likely to respond that monikers do not create any media appeal. Ages 25 to 34 and 55 to 64 are close in percentage when deciding that monikers do, in fact, create appeal in the media regarding true crime. There were no statistically significant relationships between race/ethnicity and any of the questions referring to serial killer monikers.

Discussion

This research is one of the few to attempt to discover the public's perspective on monikers for serial killers. It was designed to allow respondents to provide insight on their own beliefs on

monikers in the media, connotations of monikers, what monikers represent, and how often they encounter monikers. Most respondents agreed they are more likely to remember the moniker compared to the birth name of a serial killer, and this aligns with the aspect that what the media portrays is what will remain in the minds of the public. To add to this argument, the majority of respondents were more likely to be familiar with the monikers rather than the birth names of serial killers. This research may suggest that serial killers would not be as widely known, or recognized, if they were not attached to a moniker.

Similar to suggestions in the literature review portion, media coverage heavily focuses on utilizing the moniker as the majority of respondents agreed it is more common to view their monikers in the media. Forty-four percent of respondents answered that the media uses monikers in the media as it is easier to recognize a moniker compared to a birth name, so there is a possibility that this assumption about the media is correct. However, further research is required to recognize if this is the main reason monikers are portrayed in the media. Respondents answers regarding female monikers were unable to provide in-depth analysis of differences in males and females, but it did provide an initial analysis of realizing there are, indeed, contrasts between the two. Wilkins (2004) found the monikers chosen for female serial killers are utilized in a manner that reduces the crime to a smaller issue that is easier understood by the public. The majority of respondents were not aware of any female serial killer monikers, and as mentioned above, the public often dismisses female serial killers as not holding the same standards as males. That appears relevant even in terms of monikers as the overwhelming majority recognized differences between male and female monikers. This survey was unable to dive deeper into what those differences are.

The data suggests that the connotations of the moniker may shape the public's perception. A majority of respondents were more likely to interact with disturbing monikers rather than pleasant, or less frightening, monikers. It is possible to infer that disturbing monikers are able to attract more attention and entice readers to view the story compared to other forms. This research did not delve into specifics as to why respondents are more likely to interact with disturbing monikers, but it did contribute to the conversation that the connotations matter for headline purposes. On the other hand, respondents agreed that both eerie and catchy monikers have an influence on how the serial killer is perceived. Dvihun (2024) explained the adaptation of criminal actions, along with the portrayal of memorizing monikers, in the media often glamorizes or villainizes serial killers causing the public to ignore their reality. As previously stated, this analysis indicates that connotations play a role in engaging the audience towards a serial killer; however, it is unknown which type of moniker has the greatest impact.

Literature has infrequently suggested that monikers may indirectly allow serial killers to remain a public figure far past their death (Dvihun, 2024). Others also maintain the idea that monikers are used to sensationalize their actions and crimes committed in a manner that birth names do not. 62% of respondents do believe that monikers glamorize or idolize serial killers, so there may potentially be some weight to these theories. Sociologist Jack Levin identified that monikers are intended to create a household name for serial killers (Levin, 2008). Data from this research supports this claim as 81% felt monikers place serial killers into a celebrity status. Most respondents carry the idea that monikers are necessary to manage a persona of a serial killer as a celebrity in the media. Irons (2021) noted that serial killers are comparable to Hollywood stars due

to the true crime culture which profits off monikers to glorify the crimes committed. Data derived from the survey conducted reinforces the opinion that monikers act as a means of exploiting the horrific deeds of serial killers within media outlets. When a moniker is presented, it is no longer simply a serial killer with a high body count; instead, it is simply a nickname of a person who intends to be memorialized for their almost unimaginable actions.

Results derived from the survey on monikers disconnecting the killer from the crimes did not produce enough meaningful data to end on one conclusion. As 48% believed monikers do create a disconnect, there were also 39% who believed they do not create any form of disconnection. The answer choice for monikers creating a sense of dissociation from the killer and their crimes on the question of respondent's opinion on using monikers in the media produced a mere 33%. When provided with other choices, respondents appear to have different opinion on monikers usage in media that is not one of dissociation. However, this does not definitively rule out the notion that monikers, in some form, allow views to disconnect from the true nature of the serial killer. Wiest (2003) pointed out that monikers for serial killers manifest as characters in a story, a play, or a fable that shield the public from the crimes and, in turn, force the crimes to appear less serious or real-life.

Only 29% of respondents agreed monikers are used in the media as they represent a fictional story for the public. It is possible society has never questioned why they are so interested in stories of serial killers or why they are able to consume such graphic content with ease. If more research and studies were conducted on this topic, a more clear, concise conclusion may be made. The moniker of a serial killer formulates a spine-chilling narrative which begins the process of

desensitizing society to the true fear and violence that follows true crime (Wiest, 2003). This project was created with the assumption that monikers act as a barrier between the public and the violence a serial killer produces onto real victims. It is easier to digest obsessing over a persona, a character on a tv screen who cannot harm, than it is to realize the individual who disrupted dozens of human lives is famous and idolized. However, the data collected was unable to completely agree with the assumptions this research was based on. Future research is necessary to understand if the dissociation aspect holds validity when concerning serial killer monikers.

The majority of respondents (75%) agree that monikers are a reason why serial killers are so appealing in the culture of true crime. Media, such as the internet and documentaries, empower monikers to become a global sensation that spreads and gains virality almost instantaneously, and this perpetuates monikers to achieve recognition and fame from true crime media; furthermore, social media platforms allow the news of serial killer crimes to be discussed in widespread forums that provide strength to the moniker's infamy (Dvihun, 2024). There is no single concrete reason why monikers are extremely enticing to views of true crime media. The rationale for interest in true crime is subjective to the viewer, and monikers may only contribute a minor role in inviting spectators to engage in watching. This research does provide an insight into a small population sample crediting monikers as a possible motive for true crime media being so captivating.

When discussing the ethics of serial killers, monikers are often completely ignored in the conversation. Morals are standards that are held personally to an individual, and ethics are standards which society as a whole attempt to agree on. Usually, the ethics of serial killers focuses on them profiting off of documentaries, books, or memorabilia that is created with their name,

likeness, or moniker. The conversation on ethics may also include discussions on how social media romanticizes the murders and exploits the attractiveness of the serial killer, yet most of the time, producers do not ask permission or take into account the perspectives and emotions of the victims. While ethics are routinely discussed, the morality of monikers is never examined deeply, or at all in literature. This study intended to identify participants opinions on the ethical and moral aspect of serial killer monikers. Interestingly, one of the largest percentages (30%) of respondents did not know if they thought monikers were ethically or morally acceptable for serial killers given the nature of their crimes. Once again, there is the possibility that the public has never taken a moment to reflect on the ethics or morality of idealizing and profiting off a serial murderer.

When everyone else is discussing the topic of serial killers, one may not see why their perspective is wrong compared to others. Additionally, if respondents believe the content being produced is immoral or unethical in nature, does that make them immoral or unethical for consuming true crime content? This question may provide perspective as to why the public are unable to decide if monikers for serial killers are ethical and moral or not. Since morals are directed towards personal ideologies, that may explain why only 9% of respondents answered monikers are morally, but not ethically, acceptable. Moral standards are often outweighed by societal views of what is normal, ethical, or acceptable.

However, only 10% of respondents responded that monikers are ethically, rather than morally, acceptable. It is difficult to draw any strong conclusions on the perspective of the moral and ethical responsibility the public holds on accepting monikers for serial killers. This type of study could be replicated by assessing victims, or their families, viewpoints on how ethical and

moral monikers are. No matter how minuscule a moniker may be, they still hold quite a lot of power in maintaining and producing an image of a serial killer. The topic of ethics and morals concerning serial killer monikers are important to start a processing on evaluating if monikers should be assigned to serial killers.

Wiest (2003)'s analysis of 190 articles presented in the *New York Times* on three serial killers discovered a major discrepancy on how often monikers are used compared to the birth names of David Berkowitz, Albert DeSalvo, and Richard Ramirez. Weist's research was able to identify that, more often than not, news media and social media will use a serial killer's moniker to their advantage at every possible opportunity. A question gauging respondents' opinion on the use of monikers in the media found that 86% of respondents believe it is solely for creating a headline that will entice viewers into the story. The results from this survey provide evidence to suggest that the main purpose of monikers is, in fact, to draw public attention to a headline. As mentioned previously, disturbing and catchy monikers both have the ability to persuade viewers to any form of media which mention them. The participant's responses add strength to the notion that monikers are an Internet tactic that profits off the curiosity and morbid fascination of the public. However, is this truly the only reason? Do monikers only exist for exploitation by the media for clicks? Once again, this question remains unanswered, yet this research may be continued to search for an overall conclusion.

There were only 5% of respondents whose perspective on monikers attributed them to identification of the serial killer. Although, 44% believe monikers are used as they are easier to identify compared to birth names. This data may be a bit contradictory as these two questions are

similar in nature. There is no ability to know if respondents were confused by the questions or felt differently about the two. These questions are not the exact same, so there is a possibility that this is where the discrepancy remains. It is clear, however, that monikers are not solely used to identify the individual serial killer alone. Irons (2021) noted that besides having a catchy name to put into a police report, there exists no purpose for utilizing monikers when media tabloids report on a serial killer. The avenue in which the media publicizes a moniker certainly attracts masses of attention, and the continuous exploitation of the moniker perpetuates a cycle of never letting the killer die.

The last concern about monikers to address is that of an unidentified serial killer. When the serial killer is unidentified, does that make it acceptable to assign them a moniker? Technically, there is no birth name to use, so what would one address them by? It is important to note that literature does not address this phenomenon at all. 76% of respondents believe that assigning monikers to serial killers who have yet to be identified is acceptable considering the circumstances. Irons (2021) noted that although monikers may appear innocent and naïve, they may fuel a fire that provides motivation to the serial killers. This idea is especially possible when the serial killer is assigned a moniker before they are brought to justice. Attaching a terrifying moniker to a serial killer who is still actively committing crimes heightens their ego and provides them an identity to work towards. Unidentified serial killers and monikers are subjective to the individual, but it is necessary for literature to address this issue for any future concerns. Further research should be conducted to recognize if providing serial killers, or any mass murderer, a moniker before they are identified entices them to reach the expectations set; if so, a moniker should never be assigned.

Limitations

Although this research provided miniscule insight into the monikers of serial killers, there are several limitations that followed. The survey sample was only 126 respondents, so the data is unable to provide many significant relationships. The results of this study only came from college students and a limited number of Facebook friends, so this analysis is not generalizable to the entire public. The survey was unable to reach a large number of participants, so the views provided are only a starting point for future research. The questions within the survey were limited, so it did not reach the entire scope of the public's views on serial killer monikers.

The timeline of the survey was open for a limited amount of time, and potential respondents may not have found the opportunity to participate. It is difficult to draw any significant conclusions from a population sample of 126. If this research were to be replicated, additional questions and a greater sample size would provide a general understanding of serial killer monikers. Most questions were close ended, meaning they did not always allow for respondents to answer to his or her full point of view. Survey questions are also open to interpretation by the participant, so respondents may not have understood the full intention of the questions.

The majority of serial killers have one, or multiple, monikers attached to them that represent aspects of their crimes whether it is the weapon, the location, or the action the killer utilized. However, some of the most well-known serial killers are, in fact, not recognized by a moniker but noticed by their birth name. For example, Ted Bundy may have been identified as "Lady Killer" or "Campus Killer" on occasion in the media, but most would not automatically assume the "Lady Killer" was Ted Bundy. If one hears a description of his crimes, such as the

brutal slayings near college towns or faking injuries to lure in victims, the assumption that comes to mind is Ted Bundy. Bundy is also, subjectively, one of the most well-known, heavily discussed serial killers both for his attractiveness and craziness. Although Bundy has monikers attached to his crimes, he is not represented by these nicknames. Is Bundy simply too well-known and established that he does not require a moniker? Is there a certain aspect about his appearance or his crimes that disregard the need for a moniker?

These questions cannot be answered through the present reach topic, and the answers may contradict what results of this survey have provided. However, this topic has once again been ignored in the broader area of research on serial killers. Due this the contradictory statements above on monikers, it cannot be certainly stated that monikers formulate an identity for serial killers. The question remains that if a few serial killers can be recognized by their birth names, what is so different about other serial killers? What monikers represent and what they provide to the public or the serial killer remains unknown. Additionally, moniker is a relatively unused term for some individuals, so they may not have understood it as a synonym for nickname.

Conclusion

The implications of the moniker on serial killers and the public are the disconnect it potentially provides the public between the killer and their crimes, meaning there is a removal of the possibility of guilt for obsessing over the lowest subculture of humans. This survey was unable to concretely provide evidence that a disconnect occurs when perceiving monikers in the media; however, further research has the possibility of coming to any number of conclusions on this concept. There cannot be one concrete reason as to why the culture of serial killers is characterized

by catchy nicknames, but knowing the literal reason for their usage may change the way the public addresses the future of criminal monikers. With a better understanding, the media and public can take part in changing the way serial killers are remembered in a way that is more appropriate considering their crimes. It was important to identify which connotation of a moniker draws the public to read and interact with media of serial killers in order to alter how they are utilized in the future.

This research is only a stepping stone in a broader argument of monikers for serial killers. Although the extent is not identified through this research, connotations do have an impact on how the public interacts with media related to monikers. Some of the arguments made in the original research proposal were corroborated by results that followed the survey, and there were others that did not provide enough information to end with any solid conclusions. This research has strengthened the opinion that the media is the perpetrator of pushing monikers. Without literature to back up these claims, it is difficult to identify if this research will provide any additional insight on serial killer's monikers and their usage. At the least, this survey may motivate future researchers to replicate or gain inspiration for an in-depth analysis on monikers.

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Appendix

Q1: Do you often see the use of serial killer monikers within the media (social media, news media, television, etc.)?

- I often see their monikers in the media.
- I occasionally see their monikers in the media.
- I never see their monikers in the media.
- I do not know if I see their monikers used in the media.

Q2: Do you believe you are more likely to remember the moniker or the birth name of a serial killer?

- I believe I am more likely to remember the moniker.
- I believe I am more likely to remember the birth name.
- I believe I am more likely to remember them equally
- I do not know which I am more likely to remember.

Q3: Do you believe you are more familiar with the moniker or the birth names of serial killers?

- I believe I am more familiar with their monikers.
- I believe I am more familiar with their birth name.
- I believe I am familiar with them both equally.
- I believe I am not familiar with either the birth name or the moniker.

Q4: Do you feel it is more common to use the moniker or birth name of a serial killer in media coverage (news media, social media, television, etc.)?

- I feel monikers are more commonly used in media coverage.

- I feel birth names are more commonly used in media coverage.
- Monikers and birth names are used equally in media coverage.
- I do not know which is used more commonly in media coverage.

Q5: Do you feel you are familiar with the monikers of any female serial killers?

- Yes, I am familiar with the monikers of female serial killers.
- No, I am not familiar with the monikers of female serial killers.
- I do not know if I am familiar with the monikers of female serial killers.

Q6: Do you feel there are differences in the way female and male serial killers are assigned monikers?

- Yes, I feel there are differences between male and female monikers.
- No, I do not feel there are differences between male and female monikers.
- I feel male and female monikers are assigned equally.
- I do not know if there are differences in the way female and male serial killers are assigned monikers.

Q7: Do you feel you are more likely to interact with media that has a disturbing moniker for serial killers (e.g. The Night Stalker, Boston Strangler, Torture Doctor, etc.)?

- Yes, I am more likely to interact with media that has a disturbing moniker.
- No, I am not more likely to interact with media that has a disturbing moniker.
- I do not know if I am more likely to interact with media that has a disturbing moniker.

Q8: Do you feel you are more likely to interact with media that has a pleasant, or less frightening, moniker for serial killers (e.g. Ken and Barbie Killers, Angel of Death, Dating Game Killer, etc.)?

- Yes, I am more likely to interact with media that has a pleasant moniker.
- No, I am not more likely to interact with media that has a pleasant moniker.
- I do not know if I am more likely to interact with media that has a pleasant moniker.

Q9: Do you feel monikers which are more disturbing, eerie, or mysterious have an impact on how the serial killer is perceived by the public?

- Yes, a disturbing, eerie, or mysterious moniker has an impact on how they are perceived.
- No, a disturbing, eerie, or mysterious moniker does not have an impact on how they are perceived.
- I do not know if a disturbing, eerie, or mysterious moniker has an impact on how they are perceived.

Q10: Do you feel monikers which are more catchy or entertaining have an impact on how the serial killer is perceived by the public?

- Yes, a catchy or entertaining moniker has an impact on how they are perceived.
- No, a catchy or entertaining moniker does not have an impact on how they are perceived.
- I do not know if a catchy or entertaining moniker has an impact on how they are perceived.

Q11: Do you believe monikers for serial killers are used to glamorize or idolize the person and the crimes committed?

- Yes, I do believe monikers are used to glamorize or idolize the person and the crimes committed.
- No, I do not believe monikers are used to glamorize or idolize the person and the crimes committed.
- I do not know if the monikers are used to glamorize or idolize the person and the crimes committed.

Q12: Do you believe the monikers of a serial killer placed them into a celebrity status to the public?

- Yes, I believe the moniker of a serial killer places them into a celebrity status.
- No, I do not believe the moniker of a serial killer places them into a celebrity status.
- I do not know if the moniker of a serial killer places them into a celebrity status.

Q13: Do you believe using the monikers of serial killers allows the public to disconnect from the killer and their crimes?

- Yes, I believe using the moniker allows the public to disconnect from the killer and their crimes.
- No, I do not believe using the moniker allows the public to disconnect from the killer and their crimes.
- I do not know if a moniker allows the public to disconnect from the killer and their crimes.

Q14: Do you believe the monikers are a reason why serial killers are so appealing in true crime media?

- Yes, I believe the monikers are a reason why they are so appealing in true crime media.
- No, I do not believe the monikers are a reason why they are so appealing in true crime media.
- I do not know if the monikers are a reason why they are so appealing in true crime media.

Q15: Do you believe it is morally and ethically acceptable to assign serial killers a moniker considering the nature of their crimes?

- Yes, I believe it is morally and ethically acceptable to assign serial killers a moniker.
- No, I do not believe it is morally and ethically acceptable to assign serial killers a moniker.
- I believe it is morally acceptable, but I do not believe it is ethically acceptable.
- I do not believe it is morally acceptable, but I do believe it is ethically acceptable.
- I do not know if I believe it is morally and ethically acceptable to assign serial killers a moniker.

Q16: In scenarios where serial killers have not yet been identified, e.g., the Zodiac Killer, Jack the Ripper, do you believe it is acceptable to assign them a moniker?

- Yes, I believe it is acceptable to assign monikers to serial killers not yet identified.
- No, I do not believe it is acceptable to assign monikers to serial killers not yet identified.
- I do not know if it is acceptable to assign monikers to serial killers not yet identified.

Q17: Based on your own opinion, why do you believe the media prefers to use the monikers of serial killers?

- It is because the monikers create a sense of dissociation between the killer and their crimes.
- It is because the monikers represent their status in society.
- It is because the monikers allow for the public to feel a sense of fiction in the story.
- It is because the media needs to utilize a headline that will grab attention.
- It is easier to recognize the moniker of a serial killer than it is to recognize their birth name.
- It is only for identification purposes.
- Other (please specify)

Q18: Please select your gender identity.

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary/ third gender
- Prefer not to say
- Other (please specify)

Q19: Please select your age range.

- 18-24
- 25 – 34
- 35 – 44
- 45 – 54

- 55 – 64
- 65+

Q20: Please select your ethnic background.

- White/ Caucasian
- African American
- Hispanic or Latino
- Asian
- Two or more
- Prefer not to say
- Other (please specify)