

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Serial killers had always been seen as monsters—framed as ‘sick,’ ‘psychotic,’ and ‘disturbed’ individuals. The most portrayal of serial killers, as Hickey puts it, is that those who commit recreational killings are deemed worthy of the label ‘evil’ (Hickey 2015). In a study on serial killers featured in American movies, Epstein (1995) found that killers were often depicted as monsters with special powers, evil or demonic qualities, or were explicitly associated with mystical monsters such as vampires. One of the first and most famous serial killers in America was H. H. Holmes. In the 1880s, he killed an indeterminate number of victims—estimated to be between 20-200 people in a grisly gothic hotel built for his act and which became known as the 'Murder Castle' (Bentham 2015, 3). More now, according to Bonn (2014), a predator who brutally raped, and tortured thirty-three young men, John Wayne Gacy, in 1972, buried twenty-nine of his victims in the crawl space of his home. He buried twenty-nine of his victims in the crawl space of his home. Detectives excavated the bodies because millions of worms ate corpses.

The portrait of a serial killer then changes. They are no longer monsters but become stars. According to Vronsky (2004), discourse in the United States, in which previously the killer was a monster, is now added by the celebrity-type image of a handsome, charming killer. The coverage of Jeffrey Dahmer and Richard Ramirez marked a transformation in society. They reflect the symbiotic relationship

between the popular media, which helps generate the sensationalism surrounding this type of crime, and the essence of our consumerism fascinated by them (Haggerty 2009, 174). Eventually, ‘celebrification’ terms have been labeled on serial killers, which according to Wiest (2016), as evidenced by the comprehensive media coverage and intense public interest in serial killer cases—as well as the drastic presence of serial killings in Western entertainment media and popular culture (p. 329). As stated by Bonn (2014), the public outcry over the emergence of serial killers is well documented by the Hollywood film industry. Netflix even creates its unique documentary and series category dedicated to this content. Among them are *Making a Murderer* (2018), *Night Stalker: The Hunt for a Serial Killer* (2021), *Memories of a Murderer: The Nilsen Tapes* (2021), *The Sons of Sam: A Descent into Darkness* (2021), and many more. Fictional serial killers also often star in television shows, for example, Hannibal Lecter in the *film The Silence of the Lambs*, Dexter Morgan on the television show *Dexter*, and Joe Carroll on the television show *The Following* (Wiest 2016, 327).

There is a growing consensus that the media routinely sensationalizes serial killers as celebrity monsters. Relevant to Hickey (2015), the serial killer phenomenon has dramatically benefited the media, seeing the rapid spike in serial killer-themed media since the 1980s. The media makes the active audience consumers of the ‘idolized’ commodity. The culture industry manipulates the audience not only for consumption but also turns into industrial products and commodities. As Barnes (2015) states, the rise of serial killers in the 1980s and 1990s became a valuable source of income. The capitalists have substantial control

over anything, including converting personal values into exchange values. The media peddles dramatizations and sensational spectacles so the public can watch them. The spectacle displayed by the media often has a purpose, be it commercial, ideological, or political goals. The media usually provides agenda to frame a spectacle to achieve a goal. Media creators choose what they will present to their audience and what to highlight and exclude. According to McCombs and Shaw (2017), editors and broadcasters take an essential role in shaping our social reality as they carry out their daily duties of selecting and presenting news. Robert Entman says to encourage a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and or treatment recommendation defines as framing. The mass media directs us to what we should do, providing agendas through their reporting, while the public will follow suit. An agenda is adapted to the concerns and concepts that exist simultaneously and usually shifts according to reframing at different times. The concept of reframing occurs when the original frame undergoes a significant shift through negotiation and reconciliation, resulting in a shift in both the frame itself and the resulting impact (Kaufman, Elliott, and Shmueli 2003, 3).

From the short explanation above, the writer aims to study *Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes Season 1* (2019), directed by Joe Berlinger, first aired on Netflix on January 24th, 2019. The documentary series has only 1 season, totaling four episodes. It chronicles Bundy's life from childhood to crimes, arrests, escapes, trials, and execution in detail sourced from a compilation of archival footage and interviews of serial killer Ted Bundy, as well as interviews with his old friends and members of his community, surviving victim, and the law enforcement

officers who handled his case. The docuseries and the film *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil, and Vile* (2019) were released in the same year by Joe Berlinger, an excellent convergence content as the 30th anniversary of Theodore Bundy's execution.

The writer adopted the docu-series because she wanted to know deep down how Ted's representation was re-loved and re-constructed by the media, examined the celebrification of Ted Bundy and the agenda-setting of the media in (re)framing Ted Bundy's case. As stated by McCabe (2021), this docu-series provides Bundy's narrative that breaks the true crime genre tropes by (re)framing it to highlight Bundy's white male privilege and disparaging a sociopath with brilliant allure. Nevertheless, the docu-series overlaps with previous media glamorization that labeled Bundy the 'charming killer,' a court romanticization that makes the public adore him and constantly pay attention to him while also bringing down Ted by dramatizing his brutality. The phenomenon of celebrification by reviving his former glory long after his death and the (re)framing of Ted Bundy's case in *Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes* (2019) is believed to have the agendas.

The increase in mass killings spectacle is due to the condition of American society. In the opinion of Bentham (2015), in American society, the rise of celebrity culture and the commodification of murder continued and so increased in the late 20th century. For Wiest (2016), the main reason for this is pointing to American individualism and the democratizing characteristics of celebrity culture in the country. In contrast, the neoliberal Reagan administration and other conservatives interpreted the increasing spectacle of serial killings as a consequence of the social

changes after the 1960s (Bentham 2015, 8). In the opinion of Donnelly (2012), during the 1980s, America faced a recession, an oil crisis, and the tremendous threat of nuclear war (p. 19). The Reagan administration did everything it could to overcome public fear and anxiety about the country's problems. Communism had been contained, Russia had weak as a threat, won the war in Grenada, and the president was enforcing positivism in a new way in the US. Through popular media, the government proved that America was a great place to live for its citizens, and the 'Other' (abnormal side) was supposed to be blamed for the citizens' anxiety, so to speak, giving citizens a new threat to fight back, restrain themselves, and diversion. The state restrained these external fears by bringing society in to see that there were monsters to conquer. The rise of slasher, suspense, American horror, and murder cases gave society superficial scapegoats to fear and monsters on which to blame their unease (Donnelly 2012, 19-20).

Not only *Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes* (2019) Netflix crime genre also produces similar series like *Night Stalker: The Hunt for A Serial Killer* (2021) and *Conversations with a Killer: John Wayne Gacy Tapes* (2022). *Night Stalker: The Hunt for A Serial Killer* (2021), this American crime documentary miniseries, has a season of four episodes, released on January 13, 2021. It follows Richard Ramirez, one of the most vicious killers in US history. Although the original story is not much different from Ted Bundy, whose good looks in court made him famous, and the public's attention towards him increased into a fan club, Netflix does not make Ramirez's story that way. Directors Tiller Russell and James Carroll further glorify the prowess of detective police in this

series. Towards the end of the series, there is an impression that the media glorifies the police officers who arrested Ramirez. Many researchers feel that the director and writer went to great lengths to bias Ramirez. They want to show how the police look for the killer from minimal and random evidence. The media seems to give a special place to the authorities rather than glorifying serial killers as media darlings.

While *Conversations with a Killer: John Wayne Gacy Tapes* (2022), which totaled three episodes in one season and was released on April 20, 2022, is the second installment of *Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes series* (2019). The series depicts John Wayne Gacy, who often dresses up as the clown Pogo and is described as one of the iconic many serial killers operating in the United States during the 1970s. Much like Ted's docu-series, it illustrates through previously unheard archival audio recordings recorded during Gacy's detention, interviews with those working on the case and of one of the surviving victims. If the early story of the Bundy series describes a happy and normal childhood, this Gacy docuseries is more directed at the crime of murder, especially his views on homosexuality. Self-identification as bisexual shows a connection between shame about his sexual orientation and his penchant for killing. The final episode centers almost entirely on Gacy's horrific efficiency as he hides 33 bodies inside his house. Berlinger shows a video taken by the police and a first-hand account of what it was like to dig up many bodies in a small house on the outskirts of town. The media does not highlight the sensationalization of a celebrity killer but brings serial killer crimes back to reality, purely investigating his crimes and the true impact of his

murders. Therefore, the writer did not use the two similar docu-series as objects of study.

The writer found previous studies to support her study. First, Latora (2020), entitled *"Netflix and Kill a Framing and Uses and Gratifications Comparative Analysis of Serial Killer Representations in The Media"* solved the issue of media representation of serial killers in the *Midhunter* series (2017) compared to *Extremely Wicked Shockingly Evil and Vile* (2019) and applied the framing theory as well as use and gratifications as a which in turn revealed the audience's interest in serial killer-themed media content. Second, *From "Love Bites" to Cannibal How American Media Shaped the Cultural Acceptance of Serial Killers"* by Pearson (2021) resulted in the phenomena of two American serial killers 'Ted Bundy' and 'Jeffrey Dahmer' where media coverage is very influential in shifting and creating the new representation of criminal. The study showed that the media attracts the wider community to accept, normalize, and restore old memories so that they continue to be interested and consumed. Third, *"Facing the Gaze: The Cinematic Romanticisation of the Serial Killer in Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile,"* carried by Beer (2020), used Lacanian Film Theory. The study found that *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* (2019) romanticizes serial killer Ted Bundy through the commodification of cinematic gazes and engagement with faces and close-ups to evoke empathy in the audience, and serial killers are not seen as brutal killers but as romantic heroes. Fourth, Nield (2020), entitled *"Charming Child-Snatchers: Forming the Bogeyman in The Pied Piper, Peter Pan, and The Ted Bundy Tapes"* initiated that *Conversations with a Killer: Ted Bundy Tapes*

(2019), which model the story of the romantic killer (Bundy) as an example of modern folklore where Ted's story, similar to The Peter Pan and The Pied Piper, has been narrated for contemporary society as a charming figure rather than a hideous monster, can minimize people's fear and trauma of ghosts and horrific figures. Finally, Wiest (2016), entitled "*Casting Cultural Monsters: Representations of Serial Killers in U.S. and U.K News Media*," examined news media representations of serial killers by applying a qualitative analysis of news articles published in the United States and Great Britain. There were similarities in how US and UK news stories represent serial murders, but essential differences were evident; UK articles include more images of monsters, and US articles include more images of celebrities. The implications and meaning behind the representation of the monster image and the image of this serial killer celebrity reveal cultural values and beliefs on social, political, and economic factors in both countries. Furthermore, the previous studies provide writers with an overview of the duality of serial killers that the media always sells; vile but attractive, monster but media darling, and eventually make them stars. The writer also gains insight into the framing of media representation, which always has its factors and agendas.

The media frame for serial killers' content and spectacle is very dynamic. Serial killers can be duality—sadistic and attractive figures, again, 'worth watching.' This criminal's relationships with law enforcement and the media give him the stage and propel his illustrious status. People want more information about the latest killers and serial killers, so reporters and other media platforms continue to create more content about this genre, transforming it into a grand spectacle and entertainment

content such as movies and series. The film is unique among popular culture media in its potential to explain that we have celebrity serial killers because it is a medium defined by the representation of violent acts and the presence of stars (Schmid 2005, 105).

This study aims to open people's eyes to media manipulation with every criminal content and the perpetrators that continue to be idolized. It is crucial for society, especially young people, to be made aware that they are being colonized and exploited mentally and financially by the power of the media to make a profit. In this case, the writer would focus on the whole episode (1-4), which includes "*Handsome Devil*," "*One of Us*," "*Not My Turn to Watch Him*," and "*Burn Bundy Burn*," to make it easier for breaking the issue of the celebrification of Ted Bundy and the agenda-setting of the media in (re)framing Ted Bundy's case from *Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes Season 1*. The writer combined two theories—Richard Dyer's Star and Agenda Setting from Maxwell McCombs & Donald Shaw. The qualitative method and textual analysis were applied to this study. Adopting the concept of narrative and non-narrative aspects from Louis Gianetti, the writer unmasked the celebrification of Ted Bundy and the agenda-setting of the media in (re)framing Ted Bundy's case.

1.1 Statement of the Problems

From overviewing the object and issue, the problem of this study is as follows;

1. How does *Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes Season 1* (2019) reveal Ted Bundy's celebrification?

2. How is the media's agenda-setting in (re)framing Ted Bundy's case presented in *Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes Season 1* (2019)?

1.2 Objectives of the Study

Based on the problem statements above, the goal of this study is as follows:

1. To reveal Ted Bundy's celebrification in *Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes Season 1* (2019).
2. To get the point of the media's agenda-setting in (re)framing Ted Bundy's case presented in *Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes Season 1* (2019).

1.3 Significance of the Study

Theoretically, the writer hopes that this study could add a new perspective, especially in understanding the role of the media in (re)framing the perpetrator news using Agenda-Setting theory and the phenomena of serial killer celebrification through Star theory in films and or docu-series for modern society's insight, especially the youth. Practically it gives a meaningful contribution to readers interested in the representation of celebrity criminals, which are constantly glamorized by the media, in both mainstream and new media. Nevertheless, this study later will be an alternative reference for those who want to study similar issues, especially on the media's celebrification and agenda in (re)framing serial killers from a broader point of view.

1.4 Definitions of Key Terms

- 1 Celebrification: The changes at the individual level, or more precisely, the process by which ordinary people or public figures are transformed into celebrities (Mohamad and Hassim 2019, 2).
- 2 Docuseries: The concept of factual and documentary films that collaborate to produce a documentary film on a non-fiction television program—through an ordered collection of two or more televised episodes (Fakhreza 2020).
- 3 Framing: Organizing news content that provides context and suggests the issue through emphasis, selection, exclusion, and elaboration (Schildkraut and Muschert 2014, 28).
- 4 Serial Killer: ‘A series of three or more killings’ having common characteristics, such as suggesting the reasonable possibility that the crimes were committed by the same actor or actors (Government 1998, 15).
- 5 Shifting: Terminology shifts and reframes the problem with other metaphors, thus allowing different approaches to be developed and for contrastive solutions and policies to be drafted (Costa 2016, 19).