

Why crime content is popular: Exploring cognitive and emotional motives

January 10 2025

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Consumers of content about serial killers watch and read it to experience intense emotions that are often lacking in everyday life and to understand the reasons that drive people to commit crimes. However,

such content does not contribute to increased aggression. These conclusions were drawn by sociologists from HSE University. The results of their study have been [published](#) in *Crime, Media, Culture: An International Journal*.

Research on the modern media market shows that content about serial killers is popular worldwide, spanning films, true [crime](#) series, short videos, and written materials detailing crimes, investigations, and the biographies of those involved.

English sociologist Abby Bentham and Canadian sociologist Kevin Haggerty note that people perceive stories about serial killers as a form of entertainment that allows them to experience intense emotions. Canadian sociologist and philosopher Ryan Broll suggests that this is also a way for individuals to escape their own real-life problems.

However, some have expressed concerns that an obsession with stories about serial killers could lead to increased violence. To explore this question, researchers from HSE—Oksana Mikhailova, Darya Osokina, Lev Lyubich, and Ekaterina Gulina—conducted a series of in-depth interviews to study the motives driving Russian youth to consume crime content. A total of 26 young men and women aged 18 to 36 from 14 Russian cities were interviewed.

The main questions revolved around what type of media content about serial killers they liked, how they discovered it, and what they considered when choosing a film, video, or podcast. The respondents included fans of fictional TV shows, series, documentaries, true crime podcasts, books, popular science articles, videos, and social media posts.

The researchers focused specifically on the motives for consuming media content rather than its impact on the audience. The responses indicate that interest in [violent content](#) is not driven by a desire to

witness violence itself and does not provoke a desire to commit violence in real life.

The study identified two types of motives driving the consumption of content about serial killers: cognitive and emotional. Cognitive motives involve a desire to understand the motives of criminals, linking their actions to [childhood trauma](#), [psychological problems](#), and other factors. This helps viewers better understand the causes of human behavior. On the other hand, content about serial killers provides a way to experience intense emotions, often compensating for a lack of excitement in everyday life.

"Interest in stories about serial killers, whether in the form of series or podcasts, is not a sublimation of cruelty. The respondents did not justify the actions of serial killers. On the contrary, they stated that such crimes should be prevented," notes Oksana Mikhailova, Research Fellow at the Centre for Modern Childhood Research at HSE's Institute of Education.

The researchers emphasize that interest in such narratives is usually driven by curiosity and a search for new experiences. These findings could help psychologists develop [support programs](#) for young people experiencing emotional hunger or stress.

More information: Ekaterina Gulina et al, Why young adults consume media content about serial killers: Evidence from Russia, *Crime, Media, Culture: An International Journal* (2024). [DOI: 10.1177/17416590241290434](#)

Provided by National Research University Higher School of Economics

Citation: Why crime content is popular: Exploring cognitive and emotional motives (2025,

January 10) retrieved 2 October 2025 from <https://phys.org/news/2025-01-crime-content-popular-exploring-cognitive.html>

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