

'UGH isn't he just to die for!': Society's Obsession with Serial Killers
By Rebecca Robinson

When Robert Ressler coined the term 'serial killer' in the 1970s, I wonder if he could have ever predicted the widespread cultural fascination and in some cases adoration of these people that would ensue. My guess is probably not. From the women obsessed with Ted Bundy back in Ressler's day, to the Zodiac copycat killer Eddie Seda, this intrigue with the morbid and heinous is not a new phenomenon. In modern day society, it appears to be Hollywood perpetuating society's need to delve into the minds of those who commit atrocities beyond most people's comprehension. It seems as though there is a never-ending onslaught of Ted Bundy films and documentaries being churned out in Tinseltown, ultimately begging the question 'are we trying to humanise and sensationalise these killers, or merely spread awareness?'

As mentioned, the main culprit here is the media. TV show and film producers continually force-feed us these highly stylised retellings of true crime stories, not to mention the fictitious ones such as Hannibal and the Scream film series. It is fair to say that many people's main issue with these true crime productions is the glamourisation and therefore disrespect to the victims and their families, which manifests itself most notably in the casting of attractive actors to play abhorrent killers. This seems to be an all-too-common occurrence with the retelling of Ted Bundy's killings. Zac Efron played the man who is said to have killed more than 30 people in the 1970s, as well as Chad Michael Murray in the 2021 film 'Ted Bundy: American Boogeyman'. Though neither film was heralded as brilliant, with the criticism they received often revolving around the issues mentioned above, they created an interesting pattern of trying to make the murderer appear more attractive than he was. For obvious reasons it is pretty unsettling when a film goes 'here, look it's Zac Efron! You like Zac Efron don't you. Isn't he a handsome man! Now watch him play a sociopathic killer of women!'. To say that it is simply an accident or strange coincidence that Hollywood keeps casting actors who are known for their good looks to play serial killers would be an insult to the industry's intelligence. They know what they're doing. As a result of the constant media attention, and not the type of media attention that is just used to educate people, serial killers often become what psychologist Scott Bonn calls 'celebrity monsters', and since celebrities take up so much space within our culture, is it any wonder that these monsters end up often times with fan bases? And since much of our culture and how we engage with it comes from the media we consume, it is surely inevitable that serial killers will end up constituting a large part of this. The cycle seems to continue.



Zac Efron as Ted Bundy
Source: people.com, 2019

Chad Michael Murray as Ted Bundy
Source: E! Online, 2021

It is not unusual to be drawn to the extreme and the gruesome, so never fear if you're reading this and feeling a sense of shame or like you're part of the problem. It becomes clear

to most people when the line is crossed from innocent interest to obsession or enjoyment, but for the people who gain such an unsettling intrigue with serial killers, they seem to be unaware of this metaphorical line in the sand. They surround themselves with likeminded people, yet another thing we have to thank the internet for, and remain in this bubble of what they think is normality ... And I really hope you don't relate to what you've just read. But it is here that the culture of serial killers becomes so prevalent in Gen Z and Millennials; the generations with such pervasive access to the internet and have grown up this way. You don't have to scroll for too long on TikTok to see a young girl lusting over Richard Ramirez (yes, you read that right). It is undeniable that social media, especially TikTok over the past few years, is woven into the fabric of young people's culture. It facilitates the growth of cultures, eventually pushing them into the mainstream and creating new branches of cultures that older generations without such knowledge of the internet have never experienced or will never understand. Where once society relied on traditional forms of media such as films and TV shows, we now rely on new types of content such as podcasts of minute long TikToks. The older generation allowed serial killers to permeate into their culture via the former, and the younger generations are doing the same via the latter. If young people's culture is so heavily made up of social media and online content, and this content consist of a surprising number of serial killers and a general fascination with the extreme, surely it is inevitable that the two become intertwined. Safe to say this is a mixed blessing at best.