

Judith May Fathallah



Killer Fandom

*Fan Studies and the
Celebrity Serial Killer*

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Judith May Fathallah

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Published by:

mediastudies.press

414 W. Broad St.

Bethlehem, PA 18018, USA

Copy-editing: Emily Alexander

Cover image: drow_easy

Landing page: mediastudies.press/killer-fandom

mediastudies.press acknowledges with gratitude the support of Lancaster University Library (Pilot University OA Fund 2023-2024 - Books)

Media Manifold series - issn (*online*) 2832-6202 | issn (*print*) 2832-6199

isbn 978-1-951399-36-8 (*print*) | isbn 978-1-951399-23-8 (*pdf*)

isbn 978-1-951399-25-2 (*epub*) | isbn 978-1-951399-24-5 (*html*)

doi 10.32376/3f8575cb.c2702120

Edition 1 published in November 2023

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Affect, Bonding, Boundaries

Is There a Serial Killer Fan Community?

Conceptions of fandom as a community, like those of fans as textual poachers, originate in the efforts of early fan scholars to redeem fandom as social, healthy, and productive. Henry Jenkins (1992, 280) described fan gatherings as an “alternative social community” where other (better) practices were valued than those of the workaday world of capitalism. Camille Bacon-Smith (1992) was concerned with fandom specifically as a women’s culture, wherein feminine and feminized readings and experiences could be valued in spaces evasive of (if not resistant to) patriarchal oppression. The common and unproblematic theme is that many if not most fans seek out others who share their interest, hobbies, and favored topics of discussion: One might hesitate to generalize as strongly as Clerc that “the most primal instinct of a fan is to talk to other fans about their common interest” (1996, 74), but this is certainly a strong desire for many, especially when that interest is stigmatized, as early forms of fandom were and as serial killer fandom is today.

In this chapter, I’ll review some key ideas of “community” as applied to online cultures and fandom in particular. The foundational work of Rhianon Bury and Nancy Baym on online fan community still holds merit, and provides some grounding theory for this chapter. However, I believe that the term “community” is now over-used and under-defined, applied too freely to the kind of brief interactions and acknowledgements that are better served

by the term “networked individualism,” which Baym later preferred in many contexts (2007, 2010). Thus I will begin this chapter by recapping some of the attempts to define what online community is or can be, specifically as applied to fandom and the sites that host it, before turning to the data for evidence or lack thereof. I’ll briefly expand on the idea of a fandom gift economy. I’ll then survey evidence for serial killer fan community on Tumblr and TikTok, sites which are generally quite permissive with regard to content and thus the potential growth of stigmatized fandoms, before turning to Reddit, a site more suited to analysis of online “community” in traditional terms. I discovered that, contrary to my expectation, the traditional architectures of Reddit did *not* support killer fan community more consistently than those of Tumblr and TikTok. Pathologization and stigmatization by outsiders was a stronger factor in the formation of communal bonds than site architecture. However, the forms of community I discovered were not particularly strong on any of the sites: Typically, users demonstrated weak ties of affiliation and affection, partly due to the instability and frequent deletion of the materials they created.

Any study of a community where participants don’t interact face-to-face is ultimately indebted to Benedict Anderson’s (1983) conception of “imagined community.” Anderson demonstrated how mass print assists in forming a conception of a “nation” as community, via the production of a national consciousness and set of (supposed) common values, despite the fact that the vast majority of the populace will never meet each other face-to-face. When fan scholars turned to the internet, they were concerned to establish online fan communities as real forms of sociality. When Nancy Baym and Rhiannon Bury wrote their influential works *Tune In, Log On* (2000) and *Cyberspaces of their Own* (2005), respectively, they were working within an academic culture that was only just beginning to consider that online community might not be an oxymoron, after Harold Rheingold’s now-classic study of early home internet usage for social purposes (1993). As Ruth Deller wrote, those debates were archaic even in 2014, as “‘community’ [was by then] widely accepted as a description for groups of people gathering online and frequently used across web platforms” (2014, 239).

Michael Hammond observed that the term online community “has been used across a wide range of contexts, covering issues of attachment, emotion, community strength, motivation for participation, and relationship to technology” (2017, 1). This is true of the ways it has been used by fan scholars, from Baym (2000) and Bury (1998, 2005) onwards. Hammond’s

own threshold for online community definition is quite high, requiring both commitment and consequences for one's actions, in addition to the factors of "connection to others; reciprocity; interaction" and "agency" (2017, 1). But Hammond also recognizes that community comes in degrees, which he describes as weaker and stronger. I don't think an online community necessarily needs to fulfill a strict list of requirements to merit the name. The definition of online community (and community in general) is probably situational.

In *Tune in, Log On* (2000), Baym centered her argument for fan community on a Usenet mailing list of soap opera fans. She argued that the textual practices of the group constituted community in several ways. Firstly, through shared practices of interpretation and comparing perspectives on the soaps, such as relating storylines to their personal experiences. They also shared criticism of the text, often humorously, and established interpersonal relationships that went far beyond the programs, discussing and sharing good and bad experiences from their lives. The group had established norms of writing, notably the use of standard English and the performance of wit. Certain posters developed strong individual identities through their styles of posting and habitual signatures. The community, overall, was established by norms, practice, and self- and mutual recognition as a community, which was later threatened by an influx of new users unschooled in its norms. Bury's research (2001, 2005) shared many of the same themes, except that, as the title's allusion to Virginia Woolf suggests, it was concerned specifically with female fans and the spaces they create for themselves. Both Baym and Bury were concerned with groups established in the face of relative stigma: Soap fans are/were stigmatized for their choice of text, while Bury's fans were stigmatized for loving more culturally respectable texts *in the wrong way*: notably, sexual attraction to the actor David Duchovny from *The X-Files*. The "David Duchovny Estrogen Brigade," a tongue-in-cheek self-reference to the way male fans of *The X-Files* conceived of them, was a group of mailing lists set up by female fans in order that they could freely discuss their attractions without mockery, in addition to all sorts of other subjects.

Bury conceived of these female-dominated spaces as "heterotopias" (2005, 17), after Michel Foucault, or spaces operating according to a differing social order from mainstream culture, in which performances of female and feminine desire could be celebrated. This claim of heterotopia is less convincing than Bury's claim for community, because, while female-dominated, Bury's subjects upheld norms of standard English writing, politeness, and reasoned

debate. Indeed, both Baym and Bury's early books belong to the phase of academia that was concerned to present fandom in its most culturally respectable light. Bury herself concedes that the expressions of attraction within the forums were fairly restrained, noting that "the pressure exerted by normative discourses of femininity to be 'ladylike,' which includes avoidance of sexually explicit language, cannot be discounted" (2001). For both Bury and Baym, however, fan community is ultimately established by the repetition and consolidation of specific textual practices within bounded online spaces. These focus on the shared celebration and interpretation of favored texts, but also include identity creation, mutual support, discussion and sharing of life events, and linguistic performances of intelligence and humor. Importantly, users professed to experience their participation as a community, citing strong ties with other list members and the ability to talk to them about all kinds of matters, even those they would not discuss with family and friends.

Baym and Bury's studies were focused on the traditional format of Usenet groups. As Bury went on to acknowledge, the nature of community is mediated by and dependent on online platforms (Bury et al. 2013; Bury 2017). Platforms such as Tumblr and TikTok, however, do not support community in the same way as threaded lists of comments and replies linked to a stable online identity. But Bury has "questions as to the ongoing centrality of online community in the late second media age" given that "the design and architecture of listservs, newsgroups and discussion forums," still used but no longer dominant, "plays an important role in enabling the kind of in-depth, sustained interactivity required for community formation and maintenance over the long-term" (2017, 627, 633). Bury found that Twitter and Tumblr users didn't see these platforms as supportive of fan community. As one of her interviewees put it:

I think the problem with Tumblr is that it doesn't have threaded discussions or you are re-blogging everything. So I think if it did have threaded discussion I think it would be perfect for fandom and I think fandom probably would have jumped on it much faster. But as it is, like so much of fandom is discussion that it's just, I don't think it's ever going to be that ideal of a fit. (in Bury 2017, 639)

Bury considers that "online community will not disappear, but it may well become residual, to borrow a term from Raymond Williams (i.e., no longer the main or dominant mode of engagement)" (640). She claims that platforms

like Twitter and Tumblr lend themselves, instead, to networked individualism, wherein the individual creates an online persona with multiple weak ties to other personas across multiple webspaces, but not to community in the bounded, truly reciprocal, committed sense. I thus hypothesized that the idea of fan community might be applicable to serial killer fandom in two forms: firstly, in the sense of making space for a stigmatized group interest that is relatively resistant to industrial co-optation; and secondly, on the more traditionally formatted platform of Reddit, which is divided into interest groups called “subreddits.”

Some scholars do report finding evidence of online community on Tumblr. I have already noted Barnes on the “boundary work” of the self-professed “true crime community” of interest, wherein community is defined both by a common interest and by contrast to its Bad Other of killer fans (2019). One might posit that being defined as Bad Other offers serial killer fans a sense of self-definition, and definition as a community. Similarly, Jessica Kunert utilizes Tumblr as a site of study to continue in the theme of female sub-sections in male-dominated fandoms. Her article “The Footy Girls of Tumblr: How Women Found Their Niche in the Online Football Fandom” (2021) argues that female football fans create their own spaces on that platform for much the same reasons as Bury’s *X-Files* fans did. Here women can talk freely about football without accusations that they are invested for the “wrong reasons,” that they are attracted to the players rather than the game, that women can’t be “real” football fans, and without male participants speaking over them. Kunert also sees textual-linguistic style as constitutive of a community of practice, including “creative endeavors, such as fan art and fiction, one’s own jargon, and a celebrity discourse that resembles those in music or film fandom” (2021, 246). Fans translate and provide media for those in other countries that may not have access to the same texts, such as match reports. In short, this reads very like an updated, multimedia, more internationalized variation on Baym’s work, though the focus is more on shared texts and communal interpretation than the creation and connection of individual personas.

Sneha Kumar (2021) also argues for community on Tumblr, contending that the online fandom of the lesbian vampire web series *Carmilla* “can be understood as a lesbian community of feeling based on the exchange of positive and negative affects” (1.1). Kumar understands affect as “emotions that have an energetic dimension to them” (1.4), or a kind of mobility, capable

of moving back and forth with greater and lesser intensity. Affinity spaces, then, are social spaces demarcated by the flow of affect. Kumar argues that

for *Carmilla* fans, Tumblr acts as both an affinity space and a participatory culture. Moreover, the act of reblogging intensifies affect across the site. [. . .] The intensity of affect builds on Tumblr through user practices of repetition—reblogging the same image at different points in time. [. . .] Tumblr users often reblog posts that resonate with them—a post about *Carmilla* fans storming into Shaftesbury, the company that produced the series, to demand more *Carmilla* content has been reblogged a total of 350 times, indicating a shared desire by many in the *Carmilla* fandom to see a sequel to *The Carmilla Movie*. (2.12–17)

In this way, Kumar argues, “positive affects are able to travel through Tumblr because of its encouragement of reblogging content that speaks to varied experiences and interests” (2.17). Again, in this definition of community, the individual persona-building that Bury and Baym stressed is secondary to the flow of affect and the sharing and shared interpretation of fannish material.

Serena Hillman et al. (2014a, 2014b) also found that their fan-participants conceived of Tumblr as a community—interestingly, as “the Tumblr community” (2014b, 287)—rather than a set of subcommunities. The constant access to Tumblr allowed by portable devices and the adoption of a “unique set of jargon and use of animated GIFs to match their desired fandom activities” (2014b, 285) are key parts of this experience. (The use of GIFs can cross fandoms on Tumblr in addition to being fandom-specific: Though the authors don’t spell this out, the mobility and exchange of GIFs may be a factor in experiencing Tumblr as a community rather than as a set of subcommunities.) GIF and jargon use can be understood as the multimedia update of the in-group ways of typing Baym and Bury identified. Hillman et al. found that the concept of belonging to a specific fandom on Tumblr—rather than Tumblr as a whole—was “fuzzy” (2014b, 287). This makes sense, as the architectures of Tumblr don’t subdivide users into groups from which one can be accepted or rejected, or voluntarily join and leave. As such, belonging to an individual fandom on Tumblr is entirely a subjective experience: Users “are part of the fandom when [they] feel [they] are” (187). Significantly, Hillman et al.’s subjects frequently felt more able to express their “authentic” selves on Tumblr, as its relative anonymity and lack of connections to offline friends and acquaintances allowed users a degree of freedom they did not feel, for example, on Facebook. This finding will be important for my

test-case of a stigmatized fandom. Finally, Hillman et al. found that while the learning curve for Tumblr participation is steep, with many technological barriers to overcome for first-time users, this paradoxically works to strengthen community feeling. Casual enthusiasts or those who dip in and out of a fandom are likely to give up and find an easier platform to navigate, so that those who master Tumblr become a self-selecting group of highly interested, highly invested media fans (2014a). Shared experience between such participants afforded users “a sense of support, friendship, and community” (2014a, 781). Hillman and her co-authors do note, however, that Tumblr’s “restrictive approach to private messaging [only to blogs one has followed for more than forty-eight hours] privileges content generation and communities of shared interest over the ability to focus on one-to-one relationships” (784). This legitimates my observation that the definition of community on Tumblr is primarily based on shared texts, shared feeling, and shared interpretation.

There is some prior research on the idea of “community” on TikTok, though not on fan community *per se*. Most prior English-language interest in this relatively new platform has been concerned with data management, user privacy, and its controversial or banned status in many countries (Kessling and Wells 2020; Wang 2020; Zeng et al. 2021). However, the TikTok Cultures Research Network and the Global TikTok Researchers network in the United Kingdom are uniting researchers taking a more sociocultural perspective, as evidenced by the publication of Trevor Boffone’s edited volume *TikTok Cultures in the United States* in 2022. Several of its essays are concerned with community and how TikTok can enable or disable it to varying degrees (Divon and Ebbrecht-Hartmann 2022; Skinner 2022; Rochford and Palmer 2022). Boffone himself holds that it is “algorithmic personalization that enables identities, communities, and cultures to take shape on the platform” (Boffone 2022, 7; and cf. İnceoglu and Kaya 2021). Elle Rochford and Zachary Palmer consider the possibilities of trans community on TikTok via the output of trans creators, but ultimately conclude that the algorithm and affordances of the site facilitate trans *content* more than they do *community* (2022, 85–86). The majority of TikTok users are not trans, and the algorithm is always going to privilege and promote videos addressed and accessible to the majority rather than the minority, regardless of who the creator is. Moreover, the structures of the site are not particularly conducive to community-making:

Conversations in the comments are often difficult to follow. Replies are nested but users may comment on responses starting new threads or reply to the wrong comment. Comments and replies are not presented by like or chronologically so users new to the comment section many respond to something that had already been resolved or misunderstand the comment they were responding to. Nuanced conversations are all but impossible. (88)

Similarly, Diana Zulli and David Zulli note that TikTok is unusual in that the “For You Page” does not immediately present the user with the videos of those they have followed or friended (2021, 1878). It is notable that users refer to being *on* a certain sub-section of TikTok (Lesbian TikTok, Fashion TikTok) rather than *in* it (1883). Zulli and Zulli do use the term “community” to describe these segments, but they place the term in double quotation marks. I am not convinced that the data they are describing really merits the term “community.” I will thus return to Zulli and Zulli in chapter 5, on digital play, where I think their insights are more useful.

Overall, TikTok is a platform that privileges content, and a difficult one to study beyond that level. We know a little about how the TikTok system of video recommendation, i.e., the “For You Page,” works: It bases its recommendations on videos the user has previously watched, suggesting similar content and re-used songs, but also uses weaker signals such as the user’s location and type of device. It also deliberately diversifies the videos it offers (TikTok 2020). Its structures privilege spreading and replication, particularly of sound. TikTok has a “use that sound” feature, which allows users to create a new video set to an existing audio clip, often one that is in popular circulation. An automated system is supposed to identify and credit the sound’s original creator. It is often wrong, meaning that some users have developed a sort of honor-system of attribution by tagging, but this is by no means universal (Kaye et al. 2021). D. Bondy Valdovinos Kaye et al. write that “the community thrives on the creative reuse of popular video, audio, or meme formats, and the platform promotes copying” (2021, 3197). At best, then, we might expect to observe some form of community akin to Kumar’s affective community, where amplification by repetition of content enacts the flow of affect. I wonder, though, if we are stretching the meaning of “community” too far now.

Conversely, Alexa Hiebert and Kathy Kortes-Miller did find that TikTok served as an online community platform for gender and sexual minority youth throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors write that “without

commenting or producing content the researcher was able to feel a sense of connection and belonging within this community” (2021), simply by accessing the stream of content produced and hashtagged by gender and sexual minority youth. Relatedly, Ellen Simpson and Bryan Semaan (2021) document how LGBTQ+ youth manipulate the mysterious TikTok algorithm to the best of their ability, strategically liking and blocking posts, in order to receive a feed that feels more relevant both to their self-identity and their sense of an LGBTQ+ community, often against the direction they felt the algorithm had been pushing them. While not discounting this experience, I wonder if the term “community” can be used here in the same—fairly specific and rigorous—way that Baym and Bury have used it. The authors did document supportive comments made by participants to each other, specifically during difficult times in their lives, which is more in keeping with the theme of mutual support. TikTok users even offered offline support such as a place to stay for those at risk of homelessness. If we accept a minimal definition of community as consisting of mutual support and empathy between individuals sharing some identity factor, then this was community at work, but it may not live up to the more stringent definitions of Baym and Bury, which require developed individual online personas and consistent interactions over time. Michelle Zappavigna proposed the term “ambient affiliation” for a minimal, impermanent form of community bonded around topics of interest (2011): She was analyzing Twitter, but Melissa K. Avdeeff suggests the concept could apply to TikTok trends as well (2021).

Reddit is in many ways a more traditional community platform. Built on similar (if modernized) architectures of threaded comments, posts, and reply chains to the groups Baym and Bury originally studied, Reddit allows users to create enduring online identities through the consistency of their posting. Kelly Bergstrom and Nathaniel Poor call Reddit “a present-day embodiment of a message board system, evolved from earlier forms like Usenet and modem-based bulletin board systems” (2021, 4). There is nothing to stop a Reddit user from creating multiple identities, but many value the accumulation of “karma” via upvotes, awards for helpful, funny, or informative posts from other users, and the general creation of an online identity often dating back years. The site is divided into subforums by interest, known as subreddits. These range from the extremely general (r/news), to the incredibly specific (r/ronperlmancats, for pictures of cats that look like the actor Ron Perlman). Subreddits are moderated by user-volunteers. Kimery Lynch discusses how these relatively traditional, relatively hierarchical structures

enable community gatekeeping. Taking a K-pop fan subreddit as a case study, she argues that “having moderators distinguishes Reddit as a platform from Twitter or Tumblr. Twitter and Tumblr by design have no official built-in central leadership for each community” (2022, 108). Moderators gatekeep the subreddit’s feed by removing posts and comments that violate communal norms, which again are fairly traditional and relate back to Baym and Bury’s analysis of politeness, civility, and reasonableness. Lynch quotes a user as expressing feelings that “they were ‘raised right’ as a new fan and ‘guided’ to be a model BTS fan” by the Reddit fan community, and “would not have the same ‘perception, depth, and maturity’ as a fan if they participated on any other social media platform” (Lynch 2022, 116). Other writers have studied Reddit gaming communities and demonstrated their importance as social support and friendship beyond users’ initial attachment to the game (Bergstrom and Poor 2021).

In keeping with Bury’s later work, it seems that while some definition of “community” could be argued for a variety of fannish platforms, how far and in what ways the term applies is highly contingent on the site’s affordances and norms. Common themes in the definitions of fan community include interest and shared interpretations around key texts; the spread of affect; mutual support; in-group behavioral norms that may differ from other fan communities or the norms of the platform more broadly; and shared visual and textual languages. How far a user needs to construct a stable persona to participate in a community seems to be an open question. The question is particularly pertinent with regard to a stigmatized fandom like that of serial killers, which on one hand may be reinforced through pathologization by outsiders, but on the other, is subject to deletion and banning of materials across a range of sites.

One further note is needed before we turn to the material. Some academics have posited that fan communities are bound by a “gift economy” (Hellekson 2009), wherein fans gift their time, skill, and textual creations to other fans without expectation of direct return. This is based on a general understanding that gift-giving benefits the community as a whole, because, as a non-depletable resource, there are more creations for everyone to consume. Tisha Turk calls this “circular giving,” which is rarely one-to-one. The default is one-to-many, as each created gift is available to all:

Fandom’s gift economy is therefore fundamentally asymmetrical: because a single gift can reach so many people, and especially because it can go on reaching people

well after the initial moment of distribution, most fans receive far more gifts than we give. Even the most productive fans generally don't make as many vids as we watch, code as many sites as we use, moderate as many convention panels as we attend, or create as many links as we follow. This asymmetry is critical to fandom's functioning because it balances out the asymmetry in the other direction: not every gift recipient will reciprocate with "the gift of reaction" (Hellekson 2009, 116). (Turk 2014)

In a fandom that is both small and relatively taboo, one might assume that any gifts are created and shared with less expectation of communal return. Firstly, there are fewer members to create gifts. Further, one might imagine serial killer fandom to have a greater percentage of anonymous lurkers than active participants, reluctant to leave digital traces, consuming fan creations in silence. How will this affect the gift economy of serial killer fandom? Can it still be said to provide the bonding material of a community?

After a brief survey, the three sites I considered that hold the most potential for serial killer fan community were Tumblr, TikTok, and Reddit. The data analyzed in this chapter was gathered simultaneously, over a three-month period in spring 2022. Though the delineations of community may (or may not) be weaker on TikTok and Tumblr than on Reddit, these sites are among the most permissive with regard to content. For Tumblr and TikTok, I realized that a participant-ethnographic approach was the best way to approximate the experience of community, or lack thereof. Thus I created a Tumblr with a generic auto-generated name, and began by following the list of popular killer fan blogs already identified in the previous chapter. On Reddit, I found one subreddit devoted to self-declared fandom of Richard Ramirez. It was fairly small and did not afford much data, but I also identified the subreddit *r/hybristophilia*, which afforded much more. This was lucky: *r/hybristophilia* was deleted and banned just as the data collection period concluded. My analysis of the Tumblr and TikTok data is grounded in participant ethnography, due to the rapid turnover of posts and immersive experience created by the sites. The Reddit data, which is more textual in a traditional sense, was inductively coded by theme.

To recap, the Tumblr blogs that I initially followed were:

- <https://nightst4lkerxx.tumblr.com/>
- <https://the-real-ricardo-ramirez.tumblr.com/>
- <https://angelrose-666.tumblr.com/>

- <https://sick-girl-666.tumblr.com/>
- <https://casdied.tumblr.com/>
- <https://gunsnfilms.tumblr.com/>
- <https://richardramirezx.tumblr.com/>
- <https://richardramirezricardo.tumblr.com/>
- <https://yourickie-x.tumblr.com/>
- <https://stalkersdisneyland.tumblr.com/>
- <https://the-real-dahmer.tumblr.com/>
- <https://datingdahmer-blog.tumblr.com>
- <https://aileenwuornos-blog.tumblr.com/>
- <https://teddyshellclub.tumblr.com/>

Having followed these, I returned to my newly created Tumblr dashboard to view their content as the algorithm presented it. The first thing I noted is that the blog richardramirezx had retained a GIF of Ramirez as its header but deleted all its posts. The only text on the blog was this header:

yuzuru hanyu

“supporting athletes.

don't repost!

—new account

The imperative not to repost suggests that the former blog had been deleted due to harassment, or reported to the site and issued with a takedown notice. Yuzuru Hanyu, Google informs me, is a Japanese figure skater, suggesting an entirely new direction for the blog despite the header. I observe immediately that if community exists here, it is insecure. Blogs vanish, respawn, change direction. Some, like this one, give no explanation. Others, such as sick-girl-666 (which had respawned since the data for the previous chapter was collected), used explanatory headers like:

IM BACK!!!

Someone report my blog and it was delete!!!

FOR EVERYBODY : IF YOU DONT LIKE MY BLOG PLEASE LEAVE IT!!! DON'T
REPORT MY BLOG!!! (sick-girl-666 2022)

To persist with serial killer fandom requires some evasion, some determination, and some luck. Like the LGBTQ+ users' experience of TikTok (Simpson and Semaan 2021), serial killer fan community has to be built in negotiation with and via manipulation of the algorithm, rather than relying on it. Attempting to curate my dashboard, I followed the tags "serialkillerfans," "serialkillerfanfic," and "serialkillerfanfiction," even though they hadn't been productive in the research for the previous chapter, just in case they turned up relevant content. But when I returned to my dashboard, with these new follows, I found it overwhelmed by posts relating to the Columbine massacre. Most of these were fannish and celebratory of the school shooters, but clearly if one wishes to partake in serial killer fandom specifically, one needs to do a lot of filtering. I unfollowed the blog "truecrimefiend," which hosted and reblogged the bulk of them, and followed instead the blogs from which my selected sample reblogged. My dashboard also offered me a list of new and related Tumblrs to follow, as well as more tags, but they were too generic to reveal much relevant material, attempting to push me towards more normative true crime content such as documentaries and informational posts. All this demonstrates Hillman et al.'s (2014a) points regarding the high barriers to entry and steep learning curve for entry into a Tumblr fandom. If there is serial killer fan community here, one must be quite committed and determined to find it.

Nonetheless, after much tweaking, I did end up with a dashboard stream of serial killer fan content, in addition to some irrelevant promoted posts and notifications from the Tumblr staff. These posts seem to be unavoidable. Very few of the serial killer fan posts had comments, and those that did weren't necessarily fannish interpretations. For example, cr0w-is-dummy commented on night-monster-666's image of Ted Bundy posing in court: "ugly-ass motherfucker who murdered innocent women bc he's a fucking monster" (cr0w-is-dummy 2022). Symphony-of-damage posts on an image of a "romantic" letter to a fan sent from Ramirez in prison: "why didn't this mf try and get girls by being sweet and passionate like he pretended to be to his penpals instead of fucking r@ping women and children huh"

(2021). The use of the @ symbol is to avoid site censorship, demonstrating that even those with a more traditional interest in true crime may resort to anti-censorship techniques when violence is concerned. It seems difficult to gatekeep or maintain boundaries for a killer fan community on Tumblr, as the platform's structure would predict. User deathrowrory reblogged a series of photos that were removed by the site for breaking the terms of service, with the caption: "Crime scene photos are the most fascinating types of photos to look at. I find it surreal that Richard did that, he saw this, he made the rooms like that. These photos make me feel like I'm seeing in his perspective and it sets some sort of mood, a really distraught, devastating, surrealism type of mood" (2020). The post has 621 likes, but only three comments, the first of which is "Richard Ramirez is a lil bitch who don't even know how to draw a pentagram. Like fam, That's a pentacle" (somebodyhelpme 2020). Recall Kumar's suggestion that reblogging consolidates and transfers affect—which it does—but that affect can also be punctured by such scathing takedowns in the comments.

Some comments, however, are expressions of friendship, like "love your blog x" (truecrimefiend 2022) and "thank you s[o] m[uch] cutie" (your-rickie 2022). Other users made requests for information and more media on killers and cases, sometimes in multiple languages, akin to the knowledge community creation witnessed by Kunert (2021). "Can you tell me any weird/unusual facts about our boy Jeffrey Dahmer? Whenever I read facts or stuff online, it's mostly the same thing over and over again. I know the basics :)," asks an anonymous user on a fanblog (Anon. 1 2022). The possessive pronoun situates Dahmer and his life as the mediated text shared between the fans. Posters instruct each other quite specifically on where to find what they are looking for. Afacewithouteyes, for example, is seeking information on the Cecil Hotel room where Ramirez stayed during some of his murders. Dead-desert-star advises:

@afacewithouteyes There's this guy named Jake on YouTube that makes funny videos and in one he goes to the Cecil and actually goes into the room he stayed in (1418 or 1419). Just type in Jake Webber/Cecil Hotel/Richard Ramirez and it should come up. His facial expressions in the video are hilarious and you get a good look at the room. (dead-desert-star 2021)

@dead-desert-star Thank you! My Google searches turned up nothing so this really helps 😊. (afacewithouteyes 2021)

@afacewithouteyes no problem! He's got a another video too where he opens a box of Richard's stuff/memorabilia That's kind of funny.
(dead-desert-star 2021)

Note the cordial address, the use of emojis, and the readiness to assist. Dead-desert-star's profile figure is of a woman's face, presumably herself or at least her online persona, suggesting a relatively stable online identity.

Posters share images of merchandise related to their favored killers and compliment each other's collections. They share fantasies and report dreams, and express appreciation for the upload of rare pictures, thanking each other directly. The use of emojis is commonplace, and posters tag each other directly for attention in conversations. Favored emojis are black hearts, smiley faces, and smiley faces with hearts in their eyes. In addition to the mutual investment in and interpretation of shared texts (as funny/informative, for example), these sorts of posts convince me of at least a minimal level of serial killer fan community on Tumblr. These mutually supportive posts are scattered across the landscape, though a large number of comments were removed. They may have been removed by the blog owner for abuse, or by Tumblr staff, but I suspect that in many cases the former is more likely, because I realized fairly quickly that many of these posts were not tagged, or at least not tagged in a way that reflects their real content. The way to find serial killer fan community is not by searching tags, but by the method I arrived at—by knowing which blogs to begin with, and working outwards from them. This contributes to the sense of an in-group: a knowledge community that is in some way dependent on already possessing knowledge. Camille Bacon-Smith underwent a similar process in attempting to access the inner circles of *Star Trek* fandom, such as those producing slash fiction (1992). If I did not know Tumblr housed serial killer fandom, I would never have located these posts—which might be something for the authors of moral-panic clickbait to consider in their rampant publicizing of it. Though I kept refreshing my dashboard daily, the posts—and the users—did not vary much. This again aligns with Hillman et al.'s argument that the architectures of Tumblr lend themselves to tighter and more exclusive communities with high barriers to entry (2014a).

Of course, outsiders do find these blogs, probably through the generic tags or being directed to them by other users. Again, the architectures of Tumblr don't lend themselves to the kind of offline, fairly secretive gate-keeping Bacon-Smith experienced, nor even the moderated communities

of Reddit. User the-real-ricardo-ramirez, for example, operates an “askbox,” wherein users may submit questions which are posted to the blog. These are often anonymously penned instructions to commit suicide, or advice that “your blog makes for free birth control” (xiigauge 2021). The site owner seems amused by this, and either responds with ironic expressions of love, or equanimous retorts:

K[ill]y[our]s[elf] fat cunt (Anon. 2 2021)

Only if you do it with me whore (the-real-ricardo-ramirez 2021a)

Users from within the killer fan community will often support the blog owner: “your response was everything” (jelicaalynn 2021); “lmao you’re funny I like you” (ang3l-bitch 2021). They assure the blog owner that they are doing nothing to warrant death threats. In one retort to an accusation that “you and this sick blog are so disgusting” (Anon. 3 2021), the blog owner responds, “if you aren’t gonna say it off of anonymous then fuck off” (the-real-ricardo-ramirez 2021b). This is notable. One of Hammond’s (2017) definitions of community was that community entails some sort of accountability or consequences for one’s statements. Anonymity is the easiest way to evade communal consequences for one’s statements. The-real-ricardo-ramirez implies that, by choosing anonymity, the commenter loses the right to make judgments. To another insult, s/he responds: “tell me off anon then we’ll settle this” (2021c), implying that consequences will follow from a revelation of the accuser’s persona.

Some blogs take a less aggressive stance in their attempts at gatekeeping their fandom. They refer to those who despise them and their blogs as “antis,” presumably from “anti-fans.” An image set addressed to said “antis” was recirculated, laying out in multiple text boxes justifications for serial killer fanblogs, such as the humanity of serial killers and their families, the argument that punishment simply creates more crime, and that enjoyment in punishing criminals is primitive and brutal. A reasonable argument, overall: Though it doesn’t actually justify serial killer *fandom*, it does flag the irony of asserting that serial killer fans should die or kill themselves. There are clearly repeated attempts to carve out some kind of space for these blogs on Tumblr—by re-registering when deleted, by aggressively confronting “antis,” or by attempts to reason with them and requesting they simply leave blogs they dislike rather than report them.

As the usernames suggest, many of these blogs utilized an element of roleplay, a popular fan activity I will also address in the chapter on digital play. For the moment, I should note how roleplay enables interactivity between Tumblr users. I found accounts roleplaying (intermittently) as Richard Ramirez, Ted Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmer, and Aileen Wuornos, as well as a host of mass shooters and other criminals. There was even an account roleplaying as Darlie Routier, a woman convicted of murdering two of her children and awaiting execution in Texas. These commenters seem to assume her guilt.¹ Most of these blogs, of which the-real-ricardo-Ramirez's is one, dip in and out of the killer's voice, utilizing it to respond to commenters who address them in-role:

I want you in these guts (Anon. 4 2018)

How about I slice you open and take your guts? (the-real-ricardo-ramirez 2018a)

Are you the real Richard? (Anon. 5 2018)

Yes, I came back from the dead using my lord Satan's help (the-real-richard-ramirez 2018b)

This last comment seems to be ironic, or at least a humorous acknowledgement that, no, of course this is not the real Richard Ramirez, who has been dead since 2013. As Nicolle Lamerichs (2011) and Ellen Kirkpatrick (2015) wrote of cosplay, fan roleplay is a liminal experience which involves the fan's self in dialogue with the mediated "role." Compare:

omg r u the rEaL Ted Bundy???? 🤖👁️shook omg 🤖🔥. (Anon. 6 2018)

There's two Teds but I'm the original good one. (the-real-ted-bundy-blog 2018a)

The use of emoticons and random capitals suggest the asker is being ironic, performing excessive fan behavior upon "meeting" their favored celebrity. The acknowledgement that "There's two Teds" points up the fiction of the roleplay. The roleplay blogs make reference to a discord "group chat" in

¹ The case is very complex, and one of the most mystifying I have personally heard of in my years of true crime interest. The real Routier maintains her innocence.

which the “serial killer” personas are involved. Users attempt to persuade “the-real-ted-bundy-blog” to join them:

Join the discord chat teddy boi all the killers are waiting for their King to arrive.
(Anon. 7 2018)

As flattering as it is to be called king, I don't know what it is. (the-real-ted-bundy-blog 2018b)

Discord is a real-time chat network on which one must be invited to join groups, so this is obviously one way of gatekeeping the serial killer fan community space against antis. Once enlightened, the-real-ted-bundy appears to concede to join, after being assured there is “no drama” in the chat and any reports of such has been “lies” (Anon. 8 2018). It seems that the serial killer fan community is just as prone to infighting as other fan communities can be.

Sometimes it is difficult to tell whether the blog owner is speaking as themselves or as their character. Consider this complicated exchange, in which the users/roleplayers are confessing an attraction to either each other, their characters, something in between, or both:

tell me. i wont judge to[o] hard (the-real-jazzy-richardson 2018)

OMG FINE 😊 Because you said [you love me] “In a friendly way (I GUESS)” so which means you really don't, you love me in more than a friend way but you don't want to admit it because I look like someone from one direction (the-real-ricardo-ramirez 2018c)

u do look like someone from one direction. and i guess ur cute but u obviously dont want to date my edgy ass so..... (the-real-jazzy-richardson 2018)

EDGY ASS???? Please. I totally would (the-real-ricardo-ramirez 2018c)

so ur saying you would date me? thats surprising im a goth mop sitting in lonely corner depressed [. . .] im the worst person around here dude (the-real-jazzy-richardson 2018)

Yes, yes I would. Oh please you aren't the worst person around here I've seen worse. You aren't even near worse anyways. So yes I would (the-real-ricardo-ramirez 2018c)

For context, Jasmine Richardson is a Canadian woman who, at the age of twelve, planned and committed the murder of her parents and brother in conjunction with her then twenty-three-year-old boyfriend. Obviously, the real Ramirez can no longer date anyone (nor did he particularly look like “someone from One Direction”). And where is “around here?” Tumblr? The serial killer fan community? Are the real users—the real community members—assuring each other of their likeability, or the likeability of their personas? I will delve deeper into this, and into roleplay in general, in chapter 5, but for now I will take it as evidence of some sort of community-based support and sociability, though obviously quite different to the sort based on stable online identities that cohere with an individual’s offline self-conception. We might recall Hillman et al.’s participants stating that they felt more able to be their real selves on Tumblr than in the offline world (2014a). Perhaps rather than assuming a coherent alternate identity, we should take roleplay and flitting between personas as constitutive of this “real”ness. There are also more concrete offers of support and friendship that are clearly aimed at the user rather than to any persona, on non-roleplaying blogs. Friendly reminder [username] posts “stalkersdisneyland” under a cuteified cartoon of Ed Gein clutching a radio, “in case you need someone to talk and socialize with, I will always be available” (2022).

Fan communities are generally said to adhere around textual interpretations. At a very broad level, I would say that this one coheres around a sympathetic and/or sexualized interpretation of the mediated lives of popular serial killers. There is discussion and debate about their crimes, provision of sources and material, and the sharing and reception of support. Roleplay was a dominant form of engagement, and while this can offer support and friendship in some sense, it should also be addressed through the lens of digital play (chapter 5). The rapid deletion and replacement of blogs was a clear barrier to community on Tumblr, as was the difficulty of gatekeeping a killer fan community from outsiders. However, if one knows where to begin, by selecting the most popular serial killer fan blogs and working outwards via follows and reblogs, one can with effort discover at least a minimal level of community. This works primarily at the level of transferred affect—love emojis, expressions of support—and of practice, via reblogging and liking. I found little evidence of a specialized language or jargon beyond a basic level, such as the repetition of famous quotations and GIFs of favored serial killers, or the use of said quotations in headers. (Ramirez’s laconic statement “See you in Disneyland,” in response to receiving the death penalty, appeared with

some frequency.) All Tumblr users use emojis, and an informal tone is the norm. I did observe that serial killer fans were far more polite and cordial to each other than they were to accusatory outsiders, but that is hardly surprising. Moreover, it seems that if one is prepared to engage significantly, one can be invited to more private spaces, such as Discord chats, away from the influence of “antis.” This might be a sense in which being defined as the Bad Other of the true crime community contributes to communal boundaries: Killer fans remove themselves collectively to a different space to conduct their more private exchanges.

I employed a similar ethnographic technique in my approach to TikTok. First, I created an account and followed the accounts already sourced for the previous chapter. The account named @theodorerobertbundy was deleted as soon as I began to compile data. However, an account named @ted..bundy took its place as the top search result for #tedbundy and #fandom, and @aileenswife was replaced in the respective place by @aileenwu0rnos. These accounts appeared and disappeared with more frequency than on Tumblr, suggesting more active monitoring. This would accord with reports of TikTok’s intense user surveillance, though not with the popularly held opinion that TikTok data-gathers for purposes of Chinese intelligence (Cuthbertson 2019). Several accounts contained a header stating that their previous incarnation had been banned, and that they were returning with a similar username, such as “Old acc[ount]-rrmylover-got banned” (rrmyloverr [with an additional r] 2022a). I then returned to my newly created “For You Page,” and found it absolutely irrelevant, both in terms of the videos it displayed and the accounts it suggested to follow. Whatever the proprietary algorithm does do, it was clearly not about to help me access a serial killer fan community so easily. I doubt this has anything to do with content censorship, but more to do with the promotion of profitable content, and it may have become more precise if I had reshared relevant videos rather than just liking them.

Throughout the data collection period, TikTok continually (and comedically) attempted to persuade me to follow such accounts as @edsheeran or @gordonramseyofficial, regardless of how many serial killer fan accounts I followed. I returned to the TikTok homepage and followed several more accounts tagged with #serialkiller and #fandom or #fandom and the names of my celebrity sample. Even searching for these turned up dozens of short videos condemning their existence. It soon became clear that “antis” from outside the community were using these hashtags strategically, tagging videos with “#Jeffreydahmerfans” in order to mock and insult them. These

searches did, however, turn up more tags such as #tedbundystan and #hybristophilia. Hybristophilia is a paraphilia of attraction towards those who commit violent crimes, and seems to be used on TikTok almost exclusively for murderers. Every single one of these tags produced results designed to mock and express outrage at its existence—but they also produced results akin to the content analyzed in the prior chapter, such as brief fanvids and expressions of lust for killers with the accompanying supportive comments. The process of “favoriting” tags in order to follow them also made my “For You Page” slightly more relevant, though the videos displayed once again attempted to “nudge” me towards normative true crime content, which was informational/educational in tone. Moreover, as the days went on, I realized that I could refine the tags I followed and blocked to a certain degree in order to create more coherent communal boundaries. Obviously, tags like “ihaterichardramirezfans” were blocked, but with experience, I realized that while “tedbundyfans” (plural) was more likely to produce hate content, “tedbundyfan” (singular) was more likely to produce fan content. Still, the best and most coherent way to create a sense of community was not through tags, but by searching for popular accounts of the type I wanted and following them.

TikTok serial killer fans express support and love for each other more frequently than those on Tumblr, where posts typically had more reblogs and likes than comments. Many of the TikTok videos had long streams of comments, including some that self-reflexively constructed themselves *as* a community (cf. Bury 2005). User richardsleatherjacket, for instance, captions a video simply “I[]l[ove]y[ou] all” with a heart emoji. It opens with the onscreen text “Introducing the most hot, toxic and badass fandom” before flicking through rapid cuts of other Ramirez fan accounts (2021). “Toxic,” in this context, seems to be a badge of honor, demonstrating that being cast as the Bad Other of the true crime community works as a definitional boundary. Among the responses are: “Richie stans are always beautiful (aleks_toddy 2021); “love you too 💕” (RichardLittleDevil 2021), and “i love this fandom s[o]m[uch] (blee 2021.). One even professes to be “Proud of our fandom 🥰 love you bestiesss” (Victoria💕 2021); and while an apparently lost outsider does interject, “Mother help me I’m on Richard Ramirez fans tiktok” (Repent to kidzbopism 2021), they are clearly on alien territory and aware of it. Serial killer fans do have “space” on TikTok (heterotopic space, one supposes), and one of the ways they gatekeep is by limiting commenting ability to mutual friends.

Akin to Baym's discussion of how soap fans relate soap characters' experiences to their own lives, serial killer fans offer each other emotional support based around their interpretations of killers' lives and relation to their own. "I actually really relate to Ed [Gein]," says Dan 🌀, "he is talking about his 'issues' so well. I hate that his mother didn't know any better than just treating him like trash" (2022). The account creator infers from this that the poster is having issues with their own life, and responds, "I really hope everything is going good 🧡 my dm's are always open if you wanna vent/talk 😊 I'm here to help and I agree his mother should've known better" (.213 [username] 2022). Dan 🌀 responds with gratitude. In parallel to the offers of offline support observed by Hiebert and Miller (2021), user Richard Ramirez 💜 writes over a video displaying her own face, "Anyone else just want to runaway and do the dumbest sh!t until they get caught or just me?" (2021). Several users respond that they are ready and willing, going so far as to ask for her location. This probably isn't literal, despite richardramirez9996's plea, "Pick me up pls 🥺🥺🥺🥺🥺🥺 I'm fucking serious pick me up idc where you live come get me 🥺🥺🥺🥺🥺🥺🥺" (2021), given that the users could feasibly live on different continents, but the performative bond is one means of establishing "imagined community" between individuals who will (probably) never meet each other. Other forms of communal support include the exchange of compliments on accounts and creating particular videos or edits at the request of a fellow fan, who is then tagged. The video may be created for or at the request of one fan in particular, but everyone can view and enjoy it in the public communal space, so overall, gifters receive more than they give. TikTok was the platform on which I found most evidence of Turk's (2014) circular gifting, suggesting that, in some ways, it might be more amenable to community than Tumblr, and even, surprisingly, Reddit. Participating in a gift economy did require the creation of profiles linked to a love of killers (to give and receive the gifts), but the nature of circular giving means that should the recipient's account vanish, the gift remained. There was still a certain expectation of return, but that return could simply be approving comments from the community in general.

As on Tumblr, fans recommended source media to each other (*My Friend Dahmer* in both book and film versions was popular). Some express relief at finding other serial killer fans with whom to socialize. jeffreydahmereditzz posts "my comfort people <3" (2022), on a Bundy fan video, expressing that they feel comfort in the presence of others who share their serial killer fandom. Interestingly, with regard

to textual interpretation, I found that Wuornos fans were keenest to express and share their understanding of Wuornos's actions as justified with each other and with outsiders. "she's our queen bro," says one user (👋 2022) on a video by aileenslv, to which the creator responds, "yeah sis 🤝💖" (2022). The abbreviations of "brother" and "sister" and the fist-bump emoji expresses solidarity with a political cause. Wuornos fans deliberately construct themselves as a radical feminist community, espousing the view that fatal violence against rapists is justified: "men be like: 'she killed innocent rapists whats wrong with you 🤡🤡'" (marimbasolo4 2022). These users are thus coordinating around a specific interpretation of the media texts surrounding Wuornos. It is not the dominant interpretation, for Wuornos was indeed executed, but not a particularly obscure one either. After the hoax declaration of a so-called "National Rape Day" on April 24, 2021 gained currency on TikTok, a spate of Wuornos GIFs accompanied by assertions that men in general should be purged appeared on the site, and remained un-banned as of the collection period.

I also observed community manifested in friendly competition. User Jeffreydahmereditzz posted a sort of visual quiz wherein one must guess serial killers from context clues, with the caption "if you didn't get at least 3 points we can't be friends" (2022b). Ruby is eating my heart? [username] replies, "Got all right 🤔👍" (2022), to which the creator replies, "Great, I wouldn't like to end our friendship 😊" (2022c). The emojis demonstrate that the exchange is non-serious. The users have a friendship that will endure the mock-test regardless, but the post does show that being well-informed makes one a valuable community member. This is a form of identity construction akin to that which Baym observed in her soap fans, who would quickly recap episodes for each other. Some fans were competitive about their level of knowledge and enthusiasm for the subject. Jeffreydahmereditzz thanks .213 for help regarding some of the historical timeframes mentioned in a video, to which .213 replies, "(anytime, yk I know everything 😊)" and jeffreydahmereditzz agrees, "You really do BAHAHHA" (2022d).

Friendly (or unfriendly) competition over fan knowledge is commonplace across fandoms (see chapter 4 on subcultural capital), but competition over expressions of enthusiasm can be more complex, subject to policing for emotional/sexual excess or improperly fangirl-like conduct. This was not the case within serial killer fandom. User rrmymloverr posted a short clip of Ramirez in court showing off a pentacle drawn on his palm (whether or not

he thought he was drawing a pentagram remains undetermined). Over the image is imposed:

You're interested in the night stalker case but I stay up until 3am most nights to try to talk to Richie. I play every song that reminds me of him so many times that ik every detail about the songs. I have a whole wall filled with photos of Richie. [. . .] I've almost watched the night stalker 100 times [. . .] (rmyloverr 2022b)

Some commenters attest to similar behaviors, but user りん/巧い♥ replies, “Cool, It's not a competition through♥💖” (2022). What is particularly interesting here, in terms of pathologization, is that in the music- and television-based subcultures I am used to studying, professions of “excessive” fandom are looked down upon as embarrassing, feminine, or *cringe* (Fathallah 2017, 2020). Their profession seems almost a contest in fangirl excess. Perhaps serial killer fandom's already-pathologized status drives some fans to simply embrace the Bad Other position: indeed, to double down on it in a space more heterotopic than the relatively restrained or “ladylike” spaces Bury observed (2001). The pseudo-concerned comments like “Are you doing okay like in life?” (🙄 2022) and

I'm telling u these people are insane. (Cleo <3 2022)

Surely It's ironic (JoeLedeem 2022)

Nope these people are ac[tually] f[or] r[eal]. (Cleo <3 2022)

seem almost to be invited by the post, as excess is performed for both community insiders and for those looking in via the permeable structures of the site. These serial killer fans, positioned as freaks by fandom in general, are performing to their pathologized name. Fan community on TikTok once again centered around affect, then—but I actually found more evidence of shared interpretation of the mediated texts, especially regarding Wuornos, than on Tumblr. I also found more explicit communal support, and arguably more persistent online identities. These converged around identification as a pathologized category, celebrating fangirl excess, and a taboo object.

Reddit had only one small, not very active community specifically labeling itself serial killer fandom, which was “r/RichardRamirezFans” (164 members). However, it also hosted r/hybristophilia (2,400 members). This larger and more active subreddit was significant enough to come to the attention of

other Reddit communities like “r/cursedsubs,” devoted to pointing out and discussing “the most vile and bizarre subs to ever plague Reddit” (r/cursedsubs 2022). The first comment on its acknowledgement in r/cursedsubs is “might as well call it TikTok” (FlaerZz 2022), evidencing my impression that TikTok is considered a contemporary hub for serial killer fandom. I studied the Ramirez fan subreddit first. Though it is tagged as suitable for users over eighteen only, there is no real way of keeping out anyone younger. A pinned post at the top of the forum is titled “r/RichardRamirezFans Lounge,” and reads simply, “A place for members of r/RichardRamirezFans to chat with each other” (xkx09977 2022). This immediately sets up the space as communal, and the discussion that takes place under this post is fairly innocuous, mostly discussions of documentaries to watch and trivia such as Ramirez’s smoking habits. Such discussion could be found on any true crime forum. Other posts included the sharing of fanwork, such as “The Tale of The Night Stalker, a mini documentary I made for y’all” (darknight8200 2022), a ten-minute recap of Ramirez’s crimes that, though salacious and light-hearted, does not precisely endorse them. Commenters on YouTube inform the creator that they have come from Reddit to appreciate his video, demonstrating fan movement across platforms in search of community gifts and materials. There was also some indication of this on the other platforms, such as fans asking each other if they have a profile on another site or use Discord. Reddit fans also recommended Tumblr to each other as a good place to post fanwork:

Hi I think you might put them on Tumblr, There’s a lot of fan[s] of Richard like you, if want my Tumblr is @serialkillersyouth you might post what you did here :-)) because as I can see There’s not a lot of people here. (medeakid 2021)

Oh, That’s a good idea! Mine is @acidburnsthings, I’ll post them and you can find it there if you want! (_acidburns_ 2021)

Commenters were also keen to display their level of knowledge related to serial killer media, with comments like, “I find it interesting how I know exactly what references you used for every single one of these sketches lol” (Throwaway-num1 2021). These fans were typically supportive and complimentary of each other’s knowledge displays. There was also some evidence of communal bonding beyond a shared interest in Ramirez. Here Princesss7 is describing El Paso, the city both she and Ramirez were born in:

It's a decent sized city almost 1 million plus We're literally minutes away from Mexico We're right on the border :) lots of Hispanic culture :) unlike any other city in Texas. (Princess7 2021)

Yeah, Texas is pretty white. My mom was from Corpus Christi and they used make fun of her for being Chicana :(Are you Latina btw? Salvadoran-Italian (my mom grew up with Mexican culture but she was of Italian descent). (Felicino 2021)

I'm also a salvi :). (Tiny_Cryptographer25 2021)

Thus I would argue for a minimal degree of community here, based on gift exchange, shared texts and knowledge, and affective bonding. Overall, though, the small size of the subreddit limited the insights available. The now-purged r/hybristophilia was more fruitful. The description read:

Welcome!

This is the place to post pictures, videos, interviews, or whatever hybristophilia-related content you like in a judgement free zone.

This community is meant for those who have these unusual and conflicting feelings to be able to find camaraderie and insight, and for others to learn about hybristophilia from firsthand accounts. (2022)

Indeed, some users did feel internal conflict over their attraction to murderers (though by no means all did). This sets the subforum slightly apart from the reveling in Bad Fandom I observed above (though some of that was also present). Because the subreddit covers attraction to any and all violent criminals, I inductively coded all the posts and replies that featured the names of the killers in my sample. I was very lucky in the timing of my data collection, because the subreddit was banned and purged right at the end of the data collection period. I found that the posts came under four overlapping categories:

- A. Sharing and bonding over fantasies
- B. Gatekeeping against community outsiders
- C. Making content recommendations
- D. Sharing fanwork (circular giving)

Under the theme of sharing fantasies, posters describe their attractions. Sometimes attraction is explained in terms that psychologists have already explained as factors in *hybristophilia* (see Ramsland 2012):

I've been into guys like Richard Ramirez, Jeffrey Dahmer, and Ted Bundy every [sic] since I was a teenager. And I don't like them because they're conventionally attractive, I like them because I know what they've done to people. That's what turns me on. I rewatch *We Need to Talk about Kevin* and season 1 of *American Horror Story* over, constantly. My biggest fantasy is trying to "change" or "save" a serial killer from what's wrong with them. I watch porn where the guy borderline abuses the woman. (Deleted user 2 2022)

A responder assures the poster, who seems to be female, that this fantasy "is not new or unheard of; there are so many different movies and shows of all sorts of genres that explore [...] that theme, and even I myself get this warm feeling at the thought of being the kryptonite for some crazed person" (Deleted user 3 2022). Others are less conflicted about their fantasies, and simply seek like-minded people with whom to share them. "Tell me some of your fantasies?" requests one user:

Sometimes I imagine that I'm Ted Bundy and I'm friends with Jeffrey Dahmer. Jeff is in love with me and I know that so I exploit it for whatever reason basically playing with fire, but then one day Jeff gets tired of my games and decides to perform one of his sexy diy lobotomies on me and I'm like "Nooo Jeff!!" but It's too late, I pray it kills me but unlike all of the other victims my lucky ass survives, reduced to this helpless bumbling pet he takes care of who can never leave him. Its so humiliating, but I totally deserved it and I guess we live happily ever after or something.. or I dunno, Jeff is happy and maybe I become Stockholm syndromed over time. (bundysimp 2022)

Responses included being strangled by one's killer of choice, as well as more elaborate scenarios involving necrophiliac kinks. Apparently even before the mass deletion, though, users did not feel able to reveal their most extreme fantasies here, as partyhardcake remarked, "can't say, would make the mods narky lol" (2022). This resulted in requests that the user "message me now and spill the beans" (Thechildkiller 2022), meaning that the fantasy-based bonding could continue in a more private space. Not all the fantasies revolved around violence. "Anybody Feel the Same Way As Me?" one user asked:

[I'm] not even that smitten by his or other serial killers looks, because I don't have to same attraction to Ted Bundy/Richard Ramirez on the same level as I do with Dahmer. Even though he was gay and selfish, I want to live out some sort of fantasy life with him, care for him and be there for him. Fix him, in a strange way. I don't want to be hurt or raped like other hybristophiles, I want to help him. (Deleted user 4 2022)

Another respondent professes to “understand this on a deep level,” having been

in love with Ted Bundy since the peak of my true crime obsession began, around my 12th birthday (I'm going on 33 now) [. . .] I guess he's like the ultimate bad boy and being able to “change” him would be the accomplishment to end all accomplishments. If you ever wanna chat about this kinda stuff, feel free to message me any time. P. S. Have you watched My Friend Dahmer yet? (Deleted user 5 2022)

Several of these conversations resulted in invitations to chat in more private spaces, including Discord. In this way, it seems that the subreddit was certainly a facilitator of communality, if not a community per se. Commenters expressed a specific desire to connect with others who share their infatuations. “[I'm] glad I'm not alone” (Deleted user 6 2021) was a commonly repeated sentiment, relating this community right back to the insights of Jenkins and Bacon-Smith. Some commenters expressed that they were gay, autistic, or belonged to other minorities, and related this in some sense to their pathologized hybristophilia.

The second category of posts consisted of gatekeeping, guarding the subreddit and its interests against outsiders. A deleted user opens a typical discussion on the experience of loving a killer then adds:

Please no hate comments as they will be ignored because why tf are you even on a subreddit if you're going to be hateful? That's like going to a bar and complaining that There's alcohol there. Friendly discussion is fine tho[ugh] if you wish to understand more about this fetish. (Deleted user 7 2021)

Despite the architectures of Reddit allowing gatekeeping by moderation, outsiders did find their way to the subreddit, probably via attention from subreddits like r/cursedsubs. In response to accusations of being disgusting or “sick fucks” (MozzUpDown 2022), outsiders are typically informed that they are “on the wrong subreddit” (Deleted user 8 2022) or advised to simply leave. Their minority on the subreddit is pointed out: “I don't know

if You've noticed this or not: You are one voice in a sub of 1,440 members. I don't know what your goal is here, but I can promise you that you aren't getting anywhere" (Throwaway-num1 2022). However, in response to a post expressing disgust with hatred for hybristophiles as expressed by "antis," a deleted user asks:

Don't antis play their part in defining the community though? If there were no antis and if hybristophilia was more accepted by society, would there be as much of a sense of community on this sub and in the TCC? (Deleted user 9 2022)

That's a good point. The tight-knit community makes it strong. I guess I'm just sick of the bullying and close-mindedness of those who don't even try to understand. And tbh the fact that most "normal" people are so shocked by this just makes people wanna do it more. It's the big red button effect. (Deleted user 10 2022)

There are several points of note here, which lend support to some of my initial hypotheses. Firstly, at least some serial killer fans do consider themselves a community. Secondly, some consider their interest part of "the TCC." Thirdly, the hostility of outsiders causes some fans to lean in to their pathologization, or "the big red button effect" of temptation to provocation. Some admit that they reserve their "real" fandom for the Reddit space only, akin to Hillman et al.'s (2014a) Tumblr fans who only expressed their "real selves" on Tumblr. One user describes themselves as "coming onto this subreddit to fantasize about Richard Ramirez after saying he's a disgusting excuse of a human being" (hyejooloveclub 2021a). Others recognize the sentiment:

stop calling me and my fake serial killer hate page out 🤡👍 (Aggravating-Bag6986 2021)

LMAOOOO NAH F[or] R[eal] . . . I would be commenting on groupie's tiktoks like "y'all need to get help" then go watch richard interviews and kick my bed with my feet (hyejooloveclub 2021b)

STOP BC LITERALLY ME i got caught complimenting a columbiner once and it almost ended my career (Aggravating-Bag6986 2021)

ENDED YOUR CAREER 🤡 stop this has gone on too far!!!! I've been caught lacking a few times . . . in 19372K ultra high definition. (hyejooloveclub 2021b)

To be “caught lacking” is slang originating in Chicago street culture, and initially meant to be caught by one’s enemies without a gun. It has expanded to mean caught unprepared, or off guard, in any kind of situation. “19372K ultra high definition” is a hyperbolic exaggeration, meaning with great precision, or obviousness or undeniability: hyejooloveclub is empathizing with the fellow poster who accidentally revealed pathologized fandom in a space linked to their professional identity, with implications for their career. There are parallels here with fans who kept (and still keep) their affection for slash, or Real Person Fiction, or Real Person Slash secret and separate from their professional identities in times and places where those interests are pathologized. The subreddit functions as a heterotopic space where relative anonymity allowed these posters to express that side of themselves—or it did, until the end of May 2022. Posters also bonded with and supported each other over their discomfort with their fantasies, assuring each other that fantasies in themselves are harmless, and moreover, that feelings of empathy for a killer are a sign of one’s humanity: that feelings of wishing to nurture the damaged are normal, humane, and even morally commendable. This demonstrates that not all serial killer fans lean into the position of pathologization—some are happier to rationalize their feelings in terms of normal psychology, akin to the early phases of fandom-redemption by academics.

The category of recommendations on what to watch and read was pretty standard, and not worth quoting in depth: Fans simply asked each other if they had yet seen a film or documentary, and indicated where it could be accessed. The sharing of fanwork produced some more interesting results. As well as the usual fanvids and fanart, one poster known as FandomVulture333 was a self-employed taxidermist, and posted photographs of such creations as “a Jeffrey Dahmer fan art [. . .] out of squirrels skulls and skeletons. It’s a diorama of his shrine that he drew” (2022a). These creations were extremely impressive in their precision and attention to detail:

I knew exactly what it was just from the spider lamp. I love it!!! Great job! (xscum-fucx 2022)



Glad you love it. I strive to make accurate looking fan art. (FandomVulture333 2022b)

FandomVulture33 also provided information on their craft:

So that website sells animals and animal parts that have been culled for population control or whatever reason and they get a lot of exotics from Africa and Asia as well as the US [. . .] I'm actually in the process of trying to find enough whitetail deer ribs to paint them black and then paint very finely little gold aviator glasses (Jeffrey Dahmer) on them. I plan to sell those. (2022b)

It turns out that FandomVulture33 is a self-declared member of the online “vulture culture,” a subculture and practice of taxidermy utilizing the remains of animals that have died of natural causes. They direct other Redditors to their Instagram account, wherein they take commissions—the first example I have seen of a serial killer fan able to convert their fandom into economic capital. There is certainly an element of the gift economy here, as FandomVulture33 allowed fans to view their creations for free, but the gift economy is not the only economy that serial killer fandom supports, as I'll observe in the next chapter, on cultural capital. It seems that, contrary to my hypothesis, the relative anonymity and small size of serial killer fandom does not create a significant barrier to the practice of circular giving. Enough fans respond, at least with praise, that certain fan-creators are sufficiently encouraged to gift their creations to the group.

It seems fair to argue, then, that serial killer fan community exists online in a weak sense. In favor of the concept of a fan community, I observed:

- A. Social support and bonding
- B. The circular gifting (and occasionally sale) of fannish work
- C. Sympathy and empathy with a pathologized interestThe invitation to further discussions, and
- D. The shared interpretations of media texts.

Mitigating against a stronger definition of community was the inherent instability of the platforms, the rapidity with which content was deleted both by choice and force, the relative lack of a specific in-group jargon, and the relative anonymity of most users. That said, I believe that in-group jargon is becoming progressively less confined to particular fandoms as fannish practices become more mainstreamed and overlap with digital culture more generally. Anonymity can work both ways. I observed on Reddit that some users felt this was the only place where they could express their true desires, akin to Hillman et al.'s Tumblr users. *r/hybristophilia* is now banned and

purged, but it seems inevitable that some new subreddit will spring up in its place, just as new Tumblrs and new TikTok accounts are constantly created in response to deletion. Seeking out a serial killer fan community took some effort, especially on TikTok and Tumblr, but, as Hillman et al. showed, this can actually be a factor in consolidating a community online; compare this with the comments above on “antis.” I was correct in my expectation that pathologizing would reinforce the self-definition of a community, but incorrect that the traditional architectures of Reddit would support community more consistently than those of Tumblr and TikTok. Indeed, it may well be that r/hybristophilia would not have been banned if it had been harder to find; the Reddit search algorithm means it was easy to stumble across when searching for anything true crime-related, or related to a specific case. I was also incorrect in thinking that anonymity and the small size of the fandom would inhibit the practice of circular giving.

I turn now to the next major lens through which fan cultures have been analyzed, that of (sub)cultural capital.