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## *Fan Studies and the Celebrity Serial Killer*

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CHAPTER 4

# Killer Fandom and (Sub)Cultural Capital

Theories of cultural capital based in the work of Pierre Bourdieu have been a major influence in the field of fan studies. A huge range of scholars have adapted them to analyze fandom and the workings of fan communities and spaces: see, just for example, Bacon-Smith (1992); Fiske (1992); Jenkins (1992); Thornton (1995); Baym (2000); Hills (2002, 2005); Thomas (2002); Shefrin (2004); Williamson (2005); Williams (2010); Bennett (2014); Milner (2011); Chin (2018); Wu (2019); and Balanzategui and Lynch (2022). For Bourdieu, all participation in culture is essentially strategic: In demonstrating "proper" appreciation and interpretation of the "correct" cultural works, we gain social position in relation to other people (1984, 1991, 1996, 1993). Even if our cultural engagement is experienced as pleasure, what pleases us is actually a matter of "playing the cultural game well, of playing on one's skill at playing, at cultivating a pleasure which 'cultivates'" (Bourdieu 1984, 498). Bourdieu wasn't writing about fan culture, or popular culture in general, but rather of "official" culture in the context of his native France: museums, traditional or avant-garde art, the "correct" kind of cinema, and so on. Correct appreciation of culture, the kind that gets rewarded with status, is intellectual and disinterested, rather than over-emotional or over-invested. Bourdieu famously wrote that "taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier" (1984, 6). When we express a judgment or display our knowledge "correctly," we

gain cultural capital, as we are classified as an informed, rational, intellectual person of good taste, specifically in relation to other people.

Through this insight, academics have discussed how mainstream culture has historically derogated fandom through the stereotypes I have discussed (Jensen 1992). By expressing over-enthusiastic investment in cultural forms that have not historically been appreciated as "proper" culture, such as television or pop music, fans have been classified as lacking: lacking in proper taste, lacking in rationality, lacking in maturity. Yet scholars have also built on the cultural capital approach to understand how fans compete for distinction over the capital of particular subcultures (Thornton 1995; Hills 2002). Members of fan cultures, in this view, compete to be distinguished, to demonstrate the most knowledge, to be the best informed, the most connected, the most up-to-date compared to other fans. Their objects of enthusiasm are just different from those of official culture—or at least, they used to be. Some fan cultures are now so mainstream and disparate that the "subculture" label is tenuous. This chapter will detail some of the prior applications and adaptations of Bourdieu's work in the field of fan studies, then explore how and where it can be applied to serial killer fandom on Tumblr and TikTok before I enter a new sphere: I will turn to investigate websites for the buying and selling of murderabilia, items associated with serial killers, their lives, and their crimes. I have already established that Tumblr and TikTok are rich data sites, and that the collection of items/objects associated with fannish objects is a key means by which fans gather cultural capital (Geraghty 2014). However, murderabilia sale and collection is directly implicated in circuits of economic exchange, and thanks to the convergence of digital media and media industries, fan subcultural capital and economic capital are now in a closer relationship than they have ever been before.

For Bourdieu, cultural and economic capital were relatively distinct (Shefrin 2004). Yet cultural participation has an oddly economic rationale: "[A]ccording to Bourdieu and his followers, fans play in the sense that they tacitly recognize the 'rules' of their fan culture, attempting to build up different types of fan skill, knowledge and distinction" (Hills 2002, 20). They do this in order to gain position, vis-à-vis each other. Fan cultures are cut through by hierarchies, competition over such factors as knowledge, access or closeness to the fannish object, and social status. The term "BNF," or Big Name Fan, has been used as a not-entirely complimentary byword for the kind of fan who is well known within their community, who has a reputation for vast knowledge, and/or high quality fanwork, and/or being especially

connected to other fans and perhaps the object of fandom. Cultural capital is by far the most discussed element of Bourdieu's work, but he actually discussed three kinds of capital: "social capital ('who you know'), cultural capital ('what you know') and symbolic capital, referred to as 'prestige, reputation, fame'" (quoted in Williams 2010, 281). Matt Hills suggested that in fan studies, social capital could be conceived of as "the network of fan friends and acquaintances that a fan possesses, as well as their access to media producers and professional personnel linked with the object of fandom," while symbolic capital could be, for instance, "those fans who are nominated as spokespeople for their fandom" (2002, 69). Obviously, being connected to an object of fandom is going to be more straightforward and evident in traditional media fandom than in my case study. (One cannot very easily tweet at a serial killer and hope they follow back. Particularly not a dead one.)[1] Nonetheless, I did find that being able to evidence a network of fan friends—or more specifically, "followers" on social media sites conferred distinct subcultural capital, while a degree of symbolic capital adhered to the proprietors of more official forms of fandom linked to economic capital: the owners of murderabilia websites.

Bourdieu no doubt over-generalized and exaggerated the applicability of his rather grand and abstract theories. Firstly, many academics would object to the idea that human involvement in any kind of cultural activity is entirely strategic (Hills 2002; Thomas 2010). Bourdieu does not account for any ludic dimension at all. He seems to overlook entirely the possibility that one might engage with cultural texts simply for fun. But I am not utilizing his ideas as a total explanation of fandom (which would be ridiculous for any theory)—merely as one lens among the other major lenses I am applying to serial killer fandom in this book.

Some of the first adaptations of Bourdieu that occurred within fan studies were based on the insights that he viewed "culture" too monolithically, failing to account for the workings of "popular cultural capital" (Fiske 1992) or "subcultural capital (Thornton 1995) and their applicability to the complex lives of individual social agents. In her work on clubbing cultures, Sarah Thornton wrote of the "hipness" of clubbers as "subcultural capital"

[1] Though the killers in my sample are dead, I wouldn't go so far as to say this is impossible in all cases. Some incarcerated persons do have intermittent access to social media in certain jurisdictions. William Noguero has been detained on death row in San Quentin, California, for over thirty years, for a murder committed in the course of a robbery. His artwork, books, and social media can be viewed from https://linktr.ee/William.noguera.art.

which "confers status on its owner in the eyes of the relevant beholder. [. . .] Just as books and paintings display cultural capital in the family home, so subcultural capital is objectified in the form of fashionable haircuts and well-assembled record collections" (1995, 26–27). Knowledge, information, and its interpretation are fundamental elements of popular or subcultural capital (Jenkins 1992, 2006; Milner 2011), as applied to different sorts of objects: popular media texts, popular music, and so on. Fiske held that "popular cultural capital, unlike official cultural capital, is not typically convertible into economic capital" (1992, 34). I'm not sure how true this was even twenty years ago. As early as 1995, Thornton was discussing how fan cultural capital could be converted into economic capital by writing for niche publications, citing "music and style journalists and various record industry professionals" as examples (1995, 12). As I write this, I would wager that Fiske's claim is obsolete: Some kinds of popular cultural capital are *highly* convertible into economic capital, and the kinds are expanding faster than this researcher can keep track of: Apparently, if you gain enough followers, you can monetize your TikTok now. Xianwei Wu (2019) presented an interesting case study of a forum wherein fans could literally buy subcultural capital in the form of "forum currency," using real money. This forum currency allowed them to use more of the site's affordances and access more material. They could also earn forum currency by "upload[ing] private resources that can be sold [. . .] In this way, real world economic capital is directly translated into online economic and cultural capital." On the interchange between fannish (in his work, nerdish) and economic capital, Benjamin Woo argues that

> what appears in lay and media discourse as the mainstreaming of nerd culture might be better understood as a revaluation of its specific capitals. Capital is convertible not only between forms but also between fields, and when the "exchange rate" of field-specific capitals change, making them more valuable in a greater range of social and cultural contexts, it follows that more people will "invest" in them. (2012, 670–71)

Some fan capital is doing very well on the exchange rate at the moment. Fans who have gathered enough subcultural capital via their appreciation of video games, for example, are making whole careers out of streaming. Fanfiction is translatable into blockbuster film series. Professional cosplaying is a viable career. Of course, these exchanges are not available to everyone, and dependent on a variety of socio-economic factors, but the point is that fan capital itself is potentially translatable to economic capital at a relatively

high rate. Once again, it is a trait of serial killer fandom that fits better with more traditional fan studies lenses that, with the important and significant exception of murderabilia sales, its capital is less convertible.

For Thornton, key to subcultural capital in the clubbing world was the notion of authenticity. The "authentic" clubber must demonstrate distinction from the mainstream dance enthusiast, from the inauthentic masses lacking in taste and the "correct" knowledge of dance music (1995). One notable aspect of her work, which will become pertinent towards the end of this chapter, are her insights into the relation of subcultural capital and its circulation to the mainstream media. Negative responses from the media mainstream, such as the construction and promotion of moral panics, caused the subcultural capital of dance events and trends to rise, allowing them to play on their rebellious nature and opposition to the "cultural status quo" (1995, 129). I found that sites retailing murderabilia, an object-based form of fandom, likewise play on their notoriety and the status it confers.

Conversely, Milly Williamson (2005) objects to the idea that fandom operates in a subcultural space outside of mainstream culture—rightly pointing out that earlier writers, like Fiske and Thornton, have misread Bourdieu in the sense of positing one, monolithic mainstream culture. Rather, the struggle for cultural capital in Bourdieu's conception of culture operates between two poles, the dominant and the dominated—the dominant being the production of, say, art for profit and the economic valuation of that art (the heteronomous pole), the dominated being the conception of art for art's sake (the autonomous pole, populated by avant-garde artists). Both the dominant and dominated fractions are elements of the bourgeoisie, elements of the dominant culture. In her wide-ranging study of vampire fandom, Williamson argues that fandom operates in much same way: at one pole, the official, licensed arena of fanclubs and events, in a close relationship with economic capital, producers, and the media industry; at the other pole, unofficial, unlicensed forms of fandom that resist the involvement of money and distance themselves from the media industry. I think Williamson's point is well argued and well evidenced *in the particular fandom she is* studying—but note that the fans she studies aren't particularly lacking in official capital cultural in the first place. Rhiannon Bury (2001), likewise, collected data on fan fiction communities that guarded their boundaries according to traditional norms of "good" writing, Standard English, and taste. It seems to me that the distance of fan subcultural capital from official cultural capital

is going to be largely fandom-dependent—vampires, after all, are almost respectable. Serial killer fandom is not.

Collection and the display of physical objects related to the object of fandom is one means of gaining fannish capital (Fiske 1992; Geraghty 2014). Ekaterina Kulinicheva, in an interesting application of this theory to the subculture of sneaker enthusiasts (or "sneakerheads"), argues that collecting is about both collecting knowledge on the subject of sneakers and collecting sneakers themselves (2021).[2] The materiality of sneakers, the story behind a design, and the cultural history of sneakers attracts sneakerheads to their shoes. A large collection of expensive sneakers does not confer capital by itself. Subcultural capital is built up by the demonstration of knowledge and understanding around the collection, especially with regard to sneaker history. Fiske argued that this fannish collecting

> tends to be inclusive rather than exclusive: the emphasis is not so much upon acquiring a few good (and thus expensive) objects as upon accumulating as many as possible. The individual objects are therefore often cheap, devalued by the official culture, and mass-produced. The distinctiveness lies in the extent of the collection rather than in their uniqueness or authenticity as cultural objects. (1992, 44)

In gathering the data for this chapter, I found the opposite. When it comes to the collection of murderabilia, authenticity (expensive authenticity) is the primary measure of subcultural capital. There was a definite parallel here with Thornton's observations that "the distance between a record's production and its consumption is relevant to the cultural value bestowed upon it," and that "the environment in which a record is produced contributes to its authenticity" (1995, 106), which I explore below. Finally, Hills (2015) has argued for a newer kind of subcultural capital based in nostalgia, and the distinction conferred on certain fans for having been physically, bodily at certain types of events which are believed to belong to the past. His case study is cult cinema, which of course is no longer restricted to physical cinema buildings. He argues that the emergence of

> a "mainstreaming" discourse has become prevalent in scholar-fan responses to technological changes surrounding cult "cinema," most especially torrenting and allegedly "easy" contemporary online access to previously obscure, hard-to-find cult texts. (2015, 118)

[2] For my fellow non-Americans: sneakers are trainers, the sports shoe.

Too much accessibility, too easy replication, has devalued the subcultural capital associated with simply having seen, or having owned a copy of said texts. However, this tendency

> can be countered by considering how fans who were "there" for earlier 1970s and 1980s forms of cult (midnight movies, the Scala, and video nasties) can now perform a particular mode of retroactive subcultural capital, where the very historical inaccessibility of past cult lends it exclusivity and authenticity. (118)

Lincoln Geraghty has a related argument in his book *Cult Collectors: Nostalgia, Fandom and Collecting Popular Culture* (2014). He writes that the collection of authentic props and artifacts from cinematic and television history takes on special importance, as we don't "own" films in any physical sense: We own copies, which lack the aura of authenticity and originality. Ultimately, this line of thinking can be traced to Walter Benjamin ([1936] 2005), and his argument that a work of art loses its "aura" as it is reproduced by copying technology. For Hills specifically, however, capital attaches to the fan's physical body. This was also accounted for by Thornton, though she was concerned with the appropriate style of dress, movement, and haircut rather than the retrospective accumulations of subcultural capital across time.

This phenomenon, of fannish nostalgia capital, is not limited to cult cinema or clubbing. When I was conducting the research for *Emo: How Fans Defined a Subculture* (2020), the iconic emo-rock band My Chemical Romance was assumed to have permanently broken up. (Beyond the fondest hopes of emo kids of every generation, they re-formed in 2019.) Many, many younger fans expressed their envy to me that I had "been there" for the emo wave of the early-mid 2000s, that I had seen MCR "live," been physically present as a fifteen-year-old in the relatively smaller clubs and venues that the bands they loved were playing at the time, rather than the distant arena tours they tended towards by the late 2010s. They assumed that they would *never* "be there," bodily, for an MCR show: This distinction retrospectively accrued to the bodies of those of us who were. In serial killer fandom, no one has "been there" (hopefully). But what *have* "been there" are objects: objects that have physically touched the bodies of iconic serial killers, which have tended to attract the most subcultural and economic capital on the murderabilia sites. Moreover, I observed in the introduction how the quality of "authenticity" is attributed to serial killers in their general celebrification: the authenticity of the outlaw, the man or woman who lives entirely according to their desires.

There is not a great deal of work on how subcultural capital operates on platforms such as Tumblr. Bertha Chin, discussing social capital specifically, writes that, at a superficial level, fans' migration to social media platforms seems to signal a move toward "nonhierarchical, rhizomatic" forms of engagement, which Chin argues is only true "on a structural level (i.e., the ways these platforms function and operate)" (2018, 244). But as Chin goes on to argue, fannish interactions and statements on these platforms indicate that the theory of subcultural capital should not be dismissed. Dispensing with the concept would elide "the importance fans still place on the notions of reputation in their interaction with each other in their respective fandoms" (244). Chin argues that "fandom is still driven by the notions of presence and influence, demonstrated through the number of likes, retweets, reblogs, and shares" (244). This point is evidenced by a post I found by user svarvasoks in the middle of my data collection for this chapter. It read: "It's strange when I have thousands of followers but I only get a handful of notes. I feel like a ceo of a failing company hahah" (szarvasoks 2022). The CEO of a company is someone one would *expect* to have high social and cultural capital (e.g., a high follower count), but as the company is failing, they actually do not (the low engagement). Simply *having* followers is a weaker indication of both capitals than their engagement with a post. In Chin's study, social capital can also be gathered as "social media platforms now enable these fans to interact with celebrities and content producers" (244). This is not particularly applicable in my study except for in one very specific instance, discussed below.

Briony Hannell suggests that within the *Game of Thrones* fandom on Tumblr, screencapping and annotating GIFs of female characters with feminist-inspired commentary was a means of building subcultural capital (2017). I wouldn't particularly call this subcultural capital, but rather an illustration of Williamson's principle that fan capital isn't as distinct from some imagined discrete official culture as some theorists suggest, when discussing mainstream fandoms.

There is very little extant work regarding cultural capital on TikTok: Theorists are really just beginning to identify how and in what ways the dynamic operates. Jon Stratton has documented a trend for TikTok users to appropriate songs from previous eras, which are "part of the cultural capital of Generation X" (2021, 412), and rework them with new lyrics appropriate to the COVID-19 pandemic. He states that "the proliferation of these popular culture references in the coronavirus song lyrics can be understood in the terms of vernacular creativity and shared popular cultural capital"

(425), but it isn't particularly clear how he is using the term, and it doesn't bear much resemblance to its usual use. It essentially seems to be a synonym for "understanding." Michelle Phan (2020) argues that the appropriation of Black cultural capital by police officers on TikTok, in the forms of music, humor, and styles of speech, for example, effaces structural violence against Black people and exploits Black labor and creativity. I would not disagree, but Phan's article is really more about surveillance, racism, and power than (sub)cultural capital on TikTok per se. Finally, Gabby Unipan (2021) suggests that the deployment of lesbian-queer cultural capital within the immaterial space of TikTok defines and marks out parts of it as a community space in the absence of those physical spaces that were inaccessible during the pandemic. Again, the article is convincing so far as its premise goes, but all that is really established so far is the fact that (sub)cultural capital is gathered, deployed, and exhibited on TikTok. None of the studies are particularly detailed as to how.

When it comes to serial killer fandom, one might assume that capital is more genuinely subcultural than it is in mainstream fandoms, operating within a more restricted sphere. This would be another example of how serial killer fandom is better served through older fan studies lenses, those which treat fan cultures as relatively discrete, self-contained entities. Often, this was true: Mainstream condemnation was frequently converted into subcultural capital in the findings below, as it was for Thornton's subculturalists. However, there were exceptions. On Tumblr particularly, the display of knowledge from more normative true crime content earned subcultural capital. Moreover, I found that tagging Aileen Wuornos content with radical feminist ideology was a means of capital building: specifically, a form of radical feminism which endorses retaliatry violence against men. Again, this is not a "mainstream" idea, but the endorsement of violence on behalf of the oppressed against the oppressor is definitely a recognizable political position. It is also a demonstration that cultural capital crosses between social spheres and connected online spaces in complex ways. When it came to the study of murderabilia, subcultural capital enters a relationship of exchange with economic capital, once again demonstrating the permeabaility of fields. I also found that Bourdieu's concepts and Thornton's refinements require some tweaking to account for the relative anonymity of serial killer fandom on Tumblr and TikTok: The accumulation of subcultural capital was more applicable to posts and blogs than to users, who generally do not have a stable, long-lasting online presence.

The data for this chapter was gathered between June and September 2022. I began with a return to Tumblr, and the accounts I had previously identified as the most popular (see above). Only two (your-rickiex and angelrose666) were still active, but I kept following those, and then began searches for the most popular content again. I followed the top ten results for the hashtags "serial killer" plus "fan," "fans," and "fandom," as well as the top ten results for the name of each killer in my sample with the fan hashtags listed above addended. Again, there were no relevant matches for Jack the Ripper, though there was one for H. H. Holmes. Some of the results were on the borderline as to whether they should really be included under "fannish" or non-fannish content, so I naturally had to exercise some discretion, and some were repeats, so that the total number of blogs followed was forty-one.

For each blog, I analyzed the most popular postings based on number of "notes" (i.e., likes, reblogs, and comments), and also conducted a daily inspection of my dashboard for posts with an unusually high number of notes. The first thing one should note here is that, due to the unstable and semi-anonymous nature of Tumblr, posters don't really "build up" capital to a stable identity and position themselves against each other by utilizing it. Particular blogs gather subcultural capital, thus turn up at the top of the search results, and so do particular posts which go on to high recirculation. Moreover, there was a distinct pattern to the type of posts that gained traction, and this spawned trends of imitation. Clearly, users want their blogs to attract subcultural capital, and they learn particular strategies, consciously or not, to gain it.

The types of posts that gathered the highest number of notes were inductively coded into the following categories:

*A.* High-effort informational posts

*B.* High-effort aesthetic posts

*C.* The photographic display of collectible objects, including murderabilia and original documentation related to killers and their crimes

*D.* Jokes and humor

*E.* The espousal of radical feminism, in the case of Wuornos

At first glance, it seems that knowledge remains a key means to build subcultural capital within this fandom, just as it does with most. But the find-

ings were actually a little more complex than this. Posting long, detailed informational posts about lesser-known serial killers and their crimes could be well-rewarded with notes regardless of the lack of celebrity attached to their subject. In these cases, the quantity of knowledge itself is the important factor. But when it comes to celebrity killers, more obscure information that gives the impression of being reliably sourced is the most effective means to gain a higher number of notes. So in both cases, "rare" information is rewarded, and this can be either by virtue of its subject *or* by virtue of the information itself. Posting well-known facts about well-known killers is not well-rewarded with many notes. The following post, apparently a quotation from a book, had 2,143 notes at the time of data collection:

> As befits a man who himself became the subject of many gruesome jokes, Dahmer would sometimes try to break the monotony by kidding around with guards and inmates. "I bite," he would warn. Once he even reportedly posted a sign on the prison bulletin board for a "Cannibals Anonymous" meeting; it was swiftly removed. He was temporarily fired from his job after impersonating a staff member on the telephone. "He had a very interesting sense of humor," says Wisconsin prison system spokesman Joseph Scislowic. (bluudstainbarbie 2021, originally posted by jeffreysdahmer)

Googling the quotation doesn't actually reveal a source beyond Tumblr. But I would still class it as a high-effort post, because if the original poster did not source it from a non-indexed book or elsewhere, he/she wrote it, with some skill. Note that the degree of effort attaches subcultural capital to the original posts, just as their *recirculation* attaches subcultural capital to blogs. In this case, the blog is a very popular result for "#Jeffrey Dahmer" paired with "#fandom." The blog attracts enough subcultural capital to appear prominently in the search results, primarily by *recirculating* high-effort informational (or "informational") posts, functioning essentially as a broker in a network. This is not in line with how Bourdieu envisaged social agents gathering capital, but recirculating content is still a means of utilizing it to gain popularity and thus subcultural reward.

Another example of a high-effort post, recirculated by one of the highest-ranking Richard Ramirez fanblogs, is a detailed account of correspondence with the killer that claims to be "translated from the French book, *Richard Ramirez: Le fils du diable* (*The Son of Evil*) by Nicolas Castelaux" (deathrowrorry 2021, 743 notes). This is a real book, but again, I find no source for the translation outside Tumblr. If a Tumblr user translated it, that would

certainly count as high-effort. By contrast, posting and recirculating well-known quotations from Ramirez, such as the ubiquitous "we are all evil," attracts very few notes. One of the most-rewarded posts of all, with 4,581 notes, was a detailed pie chart showing the method of body disposal, by percentage, for a sample of 151 serial killers, complete with a written explanation for how the figures were arrived at (serialkillersandstuff 2013). The chart appears to have been created by the Tumblr user in a program such as Microsoft Excel, while charts simply copied from mainstream news or academic reports received far fewer notes (usually 20 to 30). Interestingly, then, it seems that effort is actually being rewarded over and above reliability, though the *impression* of reliability is appreciated. It is also worth noting that subcultural capital accrues over time, and that this post has been circulating since 2013.

Annotating photographs or providing information widely known to be false will attract a correction from commenters. Could this be an attempt to construct an impression of respectability for serial killer fandom, to demonstrate its similarity to the more "respectable" aspects of other fandoms—indeed to academia (cf. Hills 2002)? If so, this would be quite anomalous with my findings so far. I think, more likely, that it is a demonstration of the capital of a related arena—i.e., more normative true crime content—crossing over into the sub-domain of serial killer fandom, rather than capital being restricted to specific fields or arenas, for the other types of content that get rewarded are less "respectable" in traditional cultural terms.

Subcultural capital also accrues to high-effort aesthetic or creative posts. Well-made GIFs, edits, and photographs of popular serial killers such as Ramirez or Bundy receive high note numbers, though I also found an interesting counterexample. One blog, *your-rickie*, posts highly filtered and edited pictures of Ramirez to the point of erasing lines and creases in the skin, perfecting teeth, and giving a generally unnatural, uncanny valley–like appearance. These would require some editing skill to make but were not well received. One reason, as in Thornton's seminal work, authenticity is a valued quality. Ramirez did not really look like these pictures (some of them barely look human). The difference between these and edited photographs that say, juxtapose Wuornos with a statue of the Virgin Mary, is that those are *supposed* to be read metaphorically, whereas the "corrected" photographs of Ramirez are more in line with those of Instagram users who edit their skin to suggest an unnatural degree of smoothness and uniformity as "real." The Virgin Mary post is self-consciously an "art" post, and high-quality fanart is

rewarded. As I have discussed the content of fanart, such as GIF-edits and edited images, at length in previous chapters, it is not necessary to repeat it here: There was no significant variation from the previous findings.

Jokes, humor, and puns about serial killers, including image-based comedy, could receive hundreds of notes. Bear in mind that any post receiving thousands of notes was unusual; Tumblr doesn't offer any means to calculate statistics, but based on what now amounts to several months of immersion in serial killer fan Tumblr, I would estimate that any post receiving over 300 notes is high capital. Over 1,000 is very high; multiple thousands are the exception rather than the rule. A post with 388 notes superimposes famous images of Ramirez onto mocked-up Valentine's Day cards, amending his well-known sayings to refer to both killing people and sexual intercourse with the reader. Another post, voicing amusement and cracking jokes regarding appeals from Netflix for viewers to stop expressing attraction to Bundy, circulating shortly after the *Extremely Wicked* film premiered, had over 2,000 notes. This supports Thornton's observation that subcultures revel in condemnation by the mainstream media, gaining subcultural capital via their opposition and notoriety. This is another illustration of where serial killer fandom fits better into older fan studies models than newer ones based around media convergence.

Not all the jokes land. Some may even be too grim for the approval and reward of this subculture, and these, it seems, are jokes made at the direct expense of victims. While I was in the middle of the data collection, an image of a prone woman in a nightdress appeared on my dashboard as an original posting by a user with Bundy's image as their profile, with the caption "What does an orgasm and a pulse have in common? I don't care if she has either" (murder-mystery-theatre 2022a). Only one person had liked it two months later, and no-one reblogged it. When the same blog posts jokes where the killers are the butt of the joke, they do better. An image of Dahmer's face superimposed over that of a man eating a hamburger, with the caption "I don't think There's Five Guys in this," received almost thirty notes within two days of posting (2022b).[3] The pursuit of subcultural capital is prone to errors and missteps, and users can misjudge the boundaries.

The display of objects and documentation related to serial killers was another means by which posts accrued subcultural capital. Again, I say posts and not users, because the posts were often recirculated and thus the poster was usually not in possession of the object photographed. Some of the

[3] Five Guys is an American burger franchise.

photographs have watermarks from auction sites, and this does not prevent their appreciation and reward on Tumblr. Posting letters that Ramirez wrote from prison gains a popular Ramirez fanblog hundreds of notes, despite the fact that they tend to be superimposed with "Supernaught" or the name of another auction website (see below). In the pursuit of subcultural capital on Tumblr, curation, annotation, and display matters, as does possession, which is unsurprising given the scrapbook-like structures of a microblogging platform. Contra Thornton on the necessity of restricting access to subcultural media (1995, 161), the subcultural capital gathered by these posts is not based on exclusivity, and sharing them does not apparently dilute it. An anonymous user submitted a question to *TrueCrimeStuff:* "This might be kinda stupid but where do you find the photos from the crime scenes? Or autopsies?" (Anon. 9 2021). The blog owner replied that they primarily use Reddit, and publicly provided the URLs for several relevant forums. Such posts on this blog tend to gather hundreds to low-thousands of notes, in appreciation of the effort in finding and cataloguing authentic photographs and reports. That said, possession of the object *can* act as a trump card. The letter-image with the most notes that I found (1,600) did not have a watermark, and the original poster claimed to own it. User eliasblas writes:

> I wasn't gonna share this on here but I knew there'd be people who might appreciate seeing this.
>
> It's beyond surreal to have a letter written by Richard Ramirez in my possession. I can't quite explain how strange it felt to touch something he did. (eliasblas 2017)

The importance of "touch" in murderabilia collection is explained in *Murderabilia* (Damon and Fiennes 2019, episode 1) as a kind of "contagion theory": a superstitious belief common to most humans that could be summarized as "once in contact, always in contact." It is essentially a mystical belief, whether or not the toucher would actually endorse it with their rational mind: the idea, or at least the "feeling," that in touching something which has been in contact with X, some "property" of X is transferred to us via the object. This belief is related to Hills (2015) and Thornton (1995) on how subcultural capital can accrue to the subculturalist's body, except that in the case of murderabilia, said capital must be transferred by an intermediary object. The belief is also related to the attribution of authenticity to serial killers, as special individuals who exist outside any human-made laws or norms. I will discuss this in greater detail in the section below on auction websites.

Images of contemporary newspaper reports on the crimes of famous killers are highly rewarded. A lot of these "primary source" posts were originally created by the user Morbidology, a professional true crime writer and podcaster. It would be somewhat dubious to categorize Morbidology as a serial killer fan: She is rather too official and professionalized for that. If this were a more mainstream fandom, she would be—a perfect example of one of those fans who have gathered enough subcultural capital to exchange it for professional economic and social capital. Yet Morbidology could never actually express affection or enthusiasm for serial killers themselves (which would ruin her brand, for one thing), and some of her Tumblr is devoted to advertising her work or upcoming appearances at true crime conferences. These do not get recirculated in the fan space, but her posts of original source material do, accruing high numbers of notes. Again, subcultural capital circulates with posts rather than affixing to users. I do not think this is fan social capital of the sort gained by association with respected figures. It isn't the association with Morbidology that matters. Perhaps in the space of more conventional true crime fandom, it would be: She might qualify as something of a subcultural celebrity. But anyone can follow her Tumblr, and for serial killer fandom, it is the selection, arrangement, and reproduction of relevant posts that enables the circulation of subcultural capital, whether displaying physical objects such as gravestones or weapons, or documents such as mugshots and newspaper reports.

Combining relatively obscure information with authentic photographs enacts two strategies of subcultural capital-accumulation at once: The only popular blog dedicated to H. H. Holmes, for example, hosts a blueprint plan of the so-called "murder castle" in which Holmes committed his crimes, a photograph of the actual building, and some information on the photographs. Primary sources get far more notes than posting, for example, merchandise such as bobble-heads of serial killers or jewelry constructed from their photographs. This is contrary to Fiske's observation that, in other fan cultures, the expansiveness of one's collection matters more than the specific objects within. Possessing a single letter that Ramirez has touched is more valued than any range of mass-produced "Night Stalker" merchandise. (One can find examples of this sort of merchandise at sites like psychokillerbobbleheads.com.)

Via the affordances of Tumblr, these primary sources are reblogged into a distinctly fannish space, carrying with them the capital of authenticity and authority. But once there, they are differently inflected with meaning.

One standard piece of historical documentation that circulates on Tumblr (and had gathered 1,679 notes at the time of data collection) is a high school yearbook photograph featuring a teenage Dahmer, his face blacked out with ink. As the original poster explained in a caption (quotation marks in original, unattributed):

> "As a high school student, future serial killer **Jeffrey Dahmer** would try to sneak into as many club yearbook pictures as possible. After a teacher found out about his prank, she smudged his face out with a permanent marker. Here, he is pictured in the top center." (dahmerfordayz-blog 2018, originally posted by ted-bundie)

A distinctly fannish user comments, "i wanna see the smug lil dahmer face so bad" (queertcc 2018), and another supplies the unedited photograph with the comment, "HERE HE IS DJKSKFJSJ" (jeffreydrunk 2018). The random string of letters approximates the user smashing the keyboard, and is commonly used in fan cultures to express excitement and glee (see Hillman et al. 2014a). A relatively solemn, factual accounting is inflected with emotion and appreciation in the fannish space; describing the young Dahmer as "lil," an abbreviation of "little," implies cuteness and affection.

Posts about Wuornos accrue fewer notes than any of the other killers, in keeping with the general pattern found in this study. But those that gather the highest are those that tap into the cultural capital of a distinct kind of radical feminism, and indeed, profess to do so. "Radical feminism is the only hope for women," reads the tagline of one of the top results for "#Aileen Wuornos" plus "#fandom." The user radykalny-feminizm advertises herself as an unapologetic "misandrist." The most popular posts include a GIF taken from the Broomfield documentaries of Wuornos leaving court, raising her middle finger to the judge, and exclaiming, "Putting someone who was raped to death? You motherfucker!" (1,181 notes). Another (1,032 notes) has the caption "Too many women called evil for what is honestly a net positive," beneath an image of Bugs Bunny in a tuxedo. Inside the image are the words "I wish all women who kill abusers & rapists a very pleasant evening." From the different font styles, it is apparent that words have been added over the original text (figure 6).


*Figure 6. Death justified for abusive men (radykalny-feminizm 2022, originally posted by male-to-catgirl).*

Though not explicitly tagged with Wuornos, this post circulates in her fan blogs and is clearly a reference to her. Here is another example of how capital recirculates on Tumblr rather than accruing to particular users. As it circulates, its meaning is inflected, and capital from one field can be "translated" into another. I prefer to use the term "translated," rather than, say, "exchanged," because this is not a one-to-one relation: The informational posts carry weight over from more traditional true crime fandom, but become inflected by fannish affects. Statements on the necessity of retaliatory violence against men cross over from radical feminism, and become inflected with particular fannish appreciation for a woman who killed violent men. Thus I would argue that the theory of subcultural capital can be usefully applied to serial killer fandom on Tumblr—to an extent. It needs to be quite radically modified to account for the relative anonymity of users and the practices of circulation and recirculation that accrue capital to posts more readily than to users (though, as the ranking of search results shows, whole blogs can gain it in some sense). The theory also needs to be modified to account for those instances where capital moved between and across fields, and the practice

of curation and documentation of primary objects in addition to possessing or touching them as a means of subcultural capital building.

As noted above, when it came to analysis of TikTok through the lens of cultural capital, there was very little precedent for me in terms of where to begin. On TikTok, user identity is even more unstable than it is on Tumblr, at least in this fandom, due to the rapid turnover of deletions and remade blogs. Thus, once again, it is more accurate to speak of subcultural capital accruing to and moving through a network of videos, which can be adapted as the basis for new videos due to TikTok's affordances. Users can, for example, utilize the "duet feature" to create a new video by splitting the screen of another user's video and inserting their own content on the other half. They can reuse the sound of one video to create another. Users can also attempt to consolidate a following via the "respond to comment" feature, wherein they provide, for example, a cropped or edited version of a previous clip at a follower's request. Moreover, TikTok users are *aware* of the potential for capital accrual both within and across subcultures, and attempt to boost their own and each other's videos to recognition by the TikTok algorithm—thus increasing their chances of appearing on "For You Pages" and feeds. As previously discussed, the fine details of the algorithm are quite mysterious, but many users attempt to boost their videos by tagging them with as many hashtags as possible, including "fyp" or "For You Page." It is a persistent myth on TikTok that this hashtag catches the algorithm's attention. This practice suggests that the serial killer fandom on TikTok is more concerned with gaining subcultural capital—which might come in the form of censure from mainstream TikTok as much as it might from praise—than with staying hidden. Users attempt to assist their favored videos, sometimes commenting in capital letters, expressing the belief this will enhance their visibility to the algorithm.

Generally, subcultural capital on TikTok is measured by the popularity of the account in terms of search results, and by likes and comments on individual videos. I did not consider that "plays" were a strong indicator of subcultural capital accrual (though they might be a weak one), because a play can be recorded for multiple reasons and users know this.

In addition to the accounts I was already following from the past data gathering cycles, I re-performed the hashtag searches as described above, then followed the top ten results for each search. Some of these had changed from the last data collection period, and other accounts had been deleted. Some of the results were overlapping, meaning that in total I was following

eighty accounts. The number of videos per account was relatively small, often just one or two, and thus I was able to supplement my impressions with some statistical analysis. In addition to monitoring my dashboard daily for high-capital content, I identified the most popular video in each account by comments and likes to make up the sample. The average number of comments on a video in the sample was 126. Comments, of course, could be negative, but again, negative attention can actually operate as a measure of subcultural capital in this space. The average number of likes was 4,069. However, these are pulled upwards by two videos with an extraordinary number of comments and likes. The median and mode average for both categories was zero, meaning that any video with over approximately one hundred likes ought to be considered relatively high in subcultural capital within the serial killer fandom. The two videos with extraordinarily high subcultural capital were:

*A.* A GIF from the Broomfield documentary Life and Death (2003), wherein Wuornos exclaims, "You are lost, Nick!" objecting to Broomfield's attempts to reason with her in her paranoid state (6,843 comments, 102,200 likes)

*B.* A well-made compilation of Ramirez news reports, splicing them with sexualized pulsating music and dramatic images of the killer (2,308 comments, 206,200 likes).

The comments on these videos are almost uniformly approving and supportive.

When inductively coded, the most well-received videos in the sample fell into somewhat differing categories to the Tumblr posts, though there were also overlaps. These categories were:

*A.* High-quality fannish edits

*B.* Comedy

*C.* Roleplay

*D.* The defense of Wuornos

A few points of note: Firstly, information and knowledge were *not* a particularly reliable means of gaining subcultural capital. Those videos belonged quite distinctly to the sphere of "true crime TikTok," which was more clearly delineated here than on Tumblr. My "For You Page" continuously attempted

to nudge me towards this more normative content, probably because it receives more views and likes overall, and thus more promotion. But the capital of these videos did *not* transfer or translate into the fannish sphere. Serial killer fans on TikTok have other interests—notably, roleplay. On TikTok, however, it gathered more subcultural capital generally. The defense of Wuornos was less specifically grounded in feminist capital on TikTok than on Tumblr, relying more on emotional expressions of love and admiration than the justification of retaliatory violence against men.

By "high-quality fannish edits," I mean video edits of the type explored earlier—splicing footage of killers with effects and other media, usually to a popular song—that displayed a high degree of technical competency. Many of these had a slightly "trollish," or deliberately provocative, quality, that will be further explored in the next chapter, on digital play. For example, user ._tedbundy edits a video of herself dancing sexually (while laughing) to the song "Woman," by Doja Cat (2021), surrounded by images of Bundy and superimposed with cartoon hearts (._tedbundy 2021). The video received 300 likes and 62 comments. Many of the comments were condemnatory, such as listing the names of Bundy's victims, presumably to induce guilt or at least reflection in the creator. Yet, as it was with Thornton's subculturalists and their desire to shock the mainstream, this is still a form of subcultural capital, because condemnation is exactly what the video is inviting.

A Dahmer video, likewise, cut to the song "POV" by Ariana Grande (jeffrey_dahmer17 2020, 89 comments, 585 likes), has a comedic element in its juxtaposition of Dahmer, in odd poses and flat facial expressions, with the romantic song. Some are more straightforwardly sexual: The most popular Ramirez accounts post upbeat, sexy songs to Ramirez posing in court or jealously romantic tracks against images of him with a girl. These typically gained hundreds of comments and over a thousand likes, including one of two exceptional cases that pulled up the averages of likes and comments. An edit of Bundy images over the song "Pumped Up Kicks" by Foster the People (2011)—a somewhat odd choice, as the song concerns a school shooting—received 174 comments and 9,324 likes (tedbundy_r 2022). The distinct effort and skill involved here is that the creator has provided subtitles in Spanish. Effort and skill is rewarded, and conversely, when a creator is perceived as having exaggerated the skill and effort that has gone into making a video, they are criticized. One video by thenightstalker1960s appears to show a portrait of Ramirez created out of black and white dice. "You didnt built that, its an app," objects a commenter (s 2021). "I like using that edit app It's

good for me to use 😌," the creator confirms (thenightstalker1960s 2021). This seems almost an admission, the emoji suggesting bashfulness—a failed bid for subcultural capital that has been called out as inauthentic.

Comedy is probably even more rewarded on TikTok than on Tumblr, and much of it concerns Dahmer. Perhaps the nature of his crimes influences this—cannibalism being a subject of much comedy horror—or perhaps his media-constructed status as queer tragic monster prevents him being taken quite as seriously as Ramirez or Bundy. Some accounts engage in joking roleplay, claiming to be Dahmer himself and confessing such crimes as having eaten their own hamster. One user films herself reacting with expressions of appreciation to the 1995 song "Dahmer Is Dead" by the Violent Femmes (jeffreydahmerlover 2017). For the uninitiated, this is a short, banjo-heavy mock folk song built around the refrain "Dahmer is dead / Dahmer is dead / A broomstick bashed him upside his head."

Some of the Ramirez and Bundy vids are comedic too, but the object of the comedy is rarely the serial killer himself. Such videos are more likely to be self-reflexive, with the fan laughing at herself as she performs an excess of emotional investment in the killer, as with the fan who dances to the "let me be your woman" refrain by Doja Cat. Another video shows the creator pretending to scream to images of Ramirez to the recirculated sound known on TikTok as "Simp Scream." The scream is one of adoration—a simp, in popular cultural terms, is one who is hopelessly and ridiculously devoted to their object of their affection, who is either using them or does not acknowledge them at all. This tendency to self-mockery is complicated. Excess emotional investment is traditionally looked down on, both in cultural and subcultural spheres. It tends to deplete capital. Yet here, just as the fan attracts subcultural capital via notoriety in enjoyment of an "improper" fannish object, she also attracts it via the performance of "improper" fandom. It is these types of videos, after all, that attract the most censure and thus the most subcultural capital-via-notoriety: the lists of victims' names, the injunctions to seek help, the accusations that the creator is sick or disgusting.

Roleplay as a serial killer was a means of gathering subcultural capital that seemed to be unique to TikTok. It was not the most popular one—that would be the well-crafted edits and the display of technological skill inherent therein—but it did appear several times in the results. Roleplay on Tumblr tended to be largely ignored, or responded to only by a very small and selected cross-section of fellow roleplayers. On serial killer TikTok, a roleplay is usually constructed by posting a video of the killer one is playing, using

either their name or some variation as an account name. The videos were captioned with invitations to their "fans" or "groupies" to interact with them. One playing as Bundy, for instance, received 242 likes and 52 comments, some of which were censure, but most of which were actual engagement by self-proclaimed fans. A similar Ramirez example gathered 21 comments and 178 likes. Hashtagged "groupies," an image of Ramirez is captioned "hey my loves. Talk to me[.] Tell me about yourself" (real.ramirez 2021), to which the responses include "Hey papi richie i love you😩💋" (Leslie 🕵🏻 2021) and "Richard can I be yours?😏" (:) [username] 2021), in addition to some complaints and objections.

The videos concerning the defense of Wuornos were, as noted, less explicitly linked to feminism than those on Tumblr. The single most well-received video in the sample features Wuornos's exclamation "Oh, you are lost, Nick!" from the Broomfield documentary (2003), over a short piece of rap music I have not been able to identify. The sound is tagged simply as "aileen wuornos—original sound," and has been re-used by ten other TikTok users, including young women mouthing the words. Users don't typically expand this to a broader feminist argument about the necessity of retaliatory violence again men, but confine their defense to Wuornos specifically. When they go beyond this, posts are less rewarded. User aileen_wuornos._.fanpage, for example, gets 87 likes on a video simply stating that Aileen deserves an apology, but only 32 on one comparing the "double standards" of Ramirez's popularity on TikTok to the relatively low appreciation of Wuornos (2021). A video by user saveaileen is captioned "T[o]m[o]r[row] is National R@pe day! PLS WOMEN AND MEN STAY INSIDE!!!!" (2021). (For an explanation of the viral "National Rape Day" hoax, see p. 133.) It plays a snippet from the song "Doubt" by twenty one pilots [*sic*] (2015) with the lyric refrain "Don't forget about me" over images of Wuornos. Killing may be justification for rape, but rape is not explicitly considered a feminist concern here: Men are warned as though they are equally at risk.

Thus the content that gathers high subcultural capital on TikTok bears some similarities to that on Tumblr, but there are also some distinct differences. Firstly, it is even more anonymous, more unfixed to user identities, than it is on Tumblr, where the blogs that turned up top in the search results tended to be quite substantial in terms of content, having built up a following over time. Many of these TikToks had just one or two videos. Capital attaches to the videos themselves and recirculates by playing into themes and tropes appreciated by the fandom. These were lighter, more playful, and with a more

"trollish" edge than on Tumblr (though Tumblr could certainly be playful too): Feminism is less of a serious concern, roleplay is more approved, and information and knowledge acquisition is, notably, not rewarded. There was less evidence of translation of capital between fields; the more normative true crime content is less valued, as is the currency of feminist knowledge. Thus we *can* use cultural capital as a lens through which to view killer fandom on these rhizomatic websites, with some adaptations, but its potential is limited due to their ephemerality, particularly on TikTok. The most notable finding is probably the function of notoriety, which increases subcultural capital in a way that has not really been attended to since Thornton (2002) and to some extent Hills (2005). This is another way in which serial killer fandom fits better with older patterns of analysis.

I turn now to a different type of website. The collection of "murderabilia" is one of the most well-known aspects of serial killer fandom outside the subculture itself. Though collecting is common to most fandoms, it is only recently that fan scholars have begun to look at the practice seriously. Hills wrote that, in the early stages of fan studies, "fandom is salvaged for academic study by removing the taint of consumption and consumerism" (2002, 30). Geraghty, writing more recently, argued that "collecting has been over-looked in fan studies and [. . .] it is devalued as a fan practice because of its basis in consumption rather than production" (2014, 2). Serial killer fandom is of course devalued already, but Jack Denham (2016) has a fascinating piece on how the consumption of the killer's body after death (in the form of hair or clothes, for example) functions in the popular imagination to transfer monstrosity onto the collecting fan. The killer is no longer the consumer (of people, bodies, life) but becomes the consumed, while the collecting fan takes on the monstrous taint of consumption. Denham was actually discussing the body of Charles Manson (who was never convicted of personally killing anyone), but the broader point stands. Murderabilia collectors are aware of this taint, and for the most part—at least those who are open about their hobby—appear to revel in it.

The collection of murderabilia can be reliably dated to at least the 1700s. Ruth Penfold-Mounce (in Damon and Fiennes 2019, episode 6) describes how fingerbones of executed criminals were historically kept as good luck charms to prevent the bearer from running out of money, while hangmen themselves sold the body parts of murderers as charms against ill-health. I discussed the Victorian sale of supposed artifacts from crime scenes in chapter 1. But the online sale of murderabilia was established in the 1990s,

largely due to the efforts of subcultural celebrity Erik Holler, who also goes by Erik Gein, in a distinctly fannish appropriation of a serial killer's surname. Though Gein (naturally) claims no wish to emulate said killers, his interview with Damon and Fiennes has distinctly fannish overtones. He describes Ramirez as a "rockstar," a "fucking legend"; he claims to have been "starstruck" upon receipt of letters from him (2019, episode 1). Thus I claim that he occupies a different position than professional podcasters like Morbidology, and is one of the few good examples of social capital accrual within serial killer fandom. Today, Gein is the webmaster and owner of Serial Killers Ink (http://serialkillersink.net/), one of the world's most popular murderabilia sale sites. The others, according to Google search rankings, are Cult Collectibles (https://www.cultcollectibles.org/), Murder Auction (https://www.murderauction.com/), and Supernaught (https://www.supernaught.com/).

For the collection of data, I created an account at each of the websites and joined their mailing lists, though I did not actually receive any email from them during the collection period. I then sorted the items for sale by highest to lowest value (if the site had that facility), before repeating the process for each of the killers in my sample. This was achieved either by searching for their name and manually analyzing the results, or by selecting their names from drop-down menus. I also analyzed the way the sites presented themselves—their homepages and associated media.[4]

Murderabilia sites increased in popularity and visibility when eBay banned the sale of murderabilia in 2001. Like eBay, Murder Auction brokers auction sales by third-party sellers, but the other sites both sell and host the objects at fixed prices. I noted watermarks for some of these sites on the Tumblr photographs, where cultivation and display was more a marker of subcultural capital than authenticity. On these sites, however, authenticity and the "transfer" of the aura via the killer's physical touch was undoubtedly the hallmark of value, both subcultural and economic. In fact, I would venture to say that subcultural and economic capital are interchangeable in this instance, which raises the question of whether said capital is actually "subcultural" at all. As a partial answer, recall Woo's suggestion that (sub)cultural capital in an era of convergence is not quite the same thing as economic capital—but what it does have is an exchange rate (2012), which in this case is 1:1. The authenticity of the objects on these sites, and their closeness to the killer's physical body, largely determines their value. As I

[4] All the prices quoted were correct as of September 2022.

discussed in the introduction, "authenticity" is attributed to serial killers in popular imagination: the (wo)man outside the law and of society, a law unto themselves. The other two main factors in valuation were rarity and the degree of celebrity associated with the killer. Because these factors are so intertwined, I do not separate them, but instead discuss my findings as a single narrative.

Notoriety is clearly a marker of subcultural capital within these spaces. Serial Killers Ink self-advertises:

> We have been featured on such shows as National Geographic's TABOO TV series, EXPLOSIV in Germany, The Mark Kelley Show in Canada as well as interviewed and profiled by world class news networks such as CNN, FOX News, ABC, CBS, NBC, MSNBC, The New York Times and Reuters to name just a few. (2022a)

The site's media page hosts YouTube links to said news features, which are not entirely complimentary. They are not entirely condemnatory either: Usually they serve as a quirky "weird news" segment at the end of more serious reporting slots, featuring a range of voices from reasonable-sounding collectors to the horrified mother of a victim (*Fox News Cleveland*, uploaded by serialkillersink 2012). However, Serial Killer Ink's Facebook page also links a news story in the British tabloid *The Sun*, which condemns the site in moral panic style. The post is adorned with laughing emojis, demonstrating the proprietor's amusement at their demonization. Likewise, Murder Auction self-advertises:

> In May of 2001 a popular online auction website banned the sale of items deemed offensive, including true crime memorabilia. [. . .] Despite sharp criticism from victim advocacy groups and numerous spin-off sites that spawned in its wake, Murder Auction is the world's leading true crime memorabilia auction house. (2022)

As with Thornton's subculturalists, mainstream condemnation is subcultural capital in this space.

Across all the sites, the most expensive items were associated with a killer's hands or body. These included a bathhouse membership card signed on the back by Dahmer ($125,000, Supernaught) and the windbreaker worn by Ramirez in prison, offered with a certificate of authenticity from his ex-wife ($15,000, Supernaught). Items not signed by the killers themselves tended to require some sort of certification of authenticity. A Murder Auc-

tion seller offers the copy of the *Satanic Bible* owned by Ramirez in prison for $12,500, also with a card of certification from his ex-wife: She seems to have produced quite a few of them. Other sellers offer the (non-Satanic) prison Bibles of Dahmer and Wuornos, for $10,000 and $4,500 respectively. Celebrity factor interacts with touch here to decide the specific order of value. Supernaught hosts a hair from the head of Wuornos, with a signed card by her certifying its origin ($4,200). Serial Killers Ink offers cards signed by Bundy in the low thousands.

Yet perhaps the ultimate expression of the sanctity of the body is the fact that, on Cult Collectibles, the owner claims to possess and offer the sale of Dahmer's urn. On TikTok, he explains that the ashes were scattered, but a small amount of residue remains in one of the bags inside. If true, these are the only physical remains of Dahmer's body on earth. The asking price is $250,000, but one must email for specifics: "serious enquiries ONLY" (Cult Collectibles 2022a, caps in original). This site has a specific collection devoted to Dahmer, including the glasses he wore in prison ($75,000) and miscellaneous objects from the flat where he committed his crimes. It is worth noting that the site advertises itself somewhat differently, less an appeal to notoriety than to cultural capital of a more traditional kind:

> Archiving historical true crime media, sourcing items for museums, research and consulting for documentaries, original merch, a very active YouTube channel and more.
>
> For any media inquiries or consulting work, or help finding a specific artifact please contact us. (Cult Collectibles 2022b)

The site's owner is Taylor James, who also goes by the name Robert Applewhite.[5] He positions himself very much as an expert-fan, and also as a fan-entrepreneur. He refers to his site as a "weird hobby that became a job" (Webber 2022). YouTube commenters frequently ask him how they can be assured of the authenticity of objects, to which he replies that the process is variable and too complicated to explain in a comment, but that they should contact him about specific items for details. Rather than advertising simple "certificates of authenticity," which he has criticized on TikTok as unreliable, the Cult Collectibles website tends to invite potential buyers to email

[5] This alias is a reference to Marshall Applewhite, co-leader of the Heaven's Gate cult, whose members completed mass suicide in 1997 with the aim to ascend to an evolutionary plane above human.

the administrator, implying entrance to a more private and exclusive sphere for serious collectors only.

James/Applewhite has a presence within the narrowcast media outlets common to this subculture, such as YouTube and various niche podcasts. These are not what Thornton would call restricted channels (1995, 161), because anyone can find them, but they are of special interest to collectors. His YouTube and TikTok are largely devoted to showing his wares, especially new or interesting items, and again, the expressive enthusiasm he displays towards his objects places him rather more on the fan side of the divide than the disinterested professional collector. He also appears on the videos of certain related YouTubers, who hail him with such introductions as "when it comes to the true crime community Taylor is a legend. It's an honor to be unboxing [unpacking merchandise] with you" (Webber 2022). James and Holler fill the role of those "expert fans," then—those with a high degree of social and symbolic capital who tend to function as the "spokespeople for their fandom" (Hills 2002, 69). Of course, when speaking to more mainstream media, these expert fans tend to tone down their fannish exclamations. This is from *Rolling Stone* magazine:

> According to Holler [not Gein here], "soccer moms picking up books on Charles Manson" is an indication of how mainstream the genre has become. "These items that I sell do take the books and go a little further," he says. "There are people who are proud to hang a John Wayne Gacy painting up on their wall and they're not psychos, and the dealers are not psychos. It's just a culture that interests people." (Yuko 2019)

Holler/Gein might also be one of the only fans who can claim social capital via connection to "content producers," as identified by Chin (2018). By his own testimony (Yuko 2019), he acquires much of his content by writing directly to criminals in prison. There is something ethically striking about this. Serial killers are content producers, within a broader media landscape. Murder is the content. Holler is profiting from this, but he certainly didn't start it.

Rarity can also boost the cultural and economic capital of an item. Because Ramirez wrote so many letters, they tend to be valued in the hundreds, or even less, on Serial Killers Ink, whereas Wuornos's go for thousands despite fact she is a less "popular" and "admired" killer than he is. As I descended the price ranges, I found articles *authentically associated* with the killers, but which never touched them, such as newspaper clippings and Wanted posters from their era. Contemporary reports on the Bundy trial retail for

about $1,400 (Supernaught) and real courtroom sketches in the high hundreds (Serial Killers Ink). Toward the bottom of the price range, I found the cheap, mass-produced collectibles, like a Bundy "collectors card" for $35 (Supernaught), and the replicas, like a reproduction of Dahmer's seventh grade yearbook photograph for $10 (Supernaught). The difference in value between replicas and originals is neatly demonstrated by figure 7, from Cult Collectibles. This is an original and a reprint of the same Dahmer family photograph, priced $5,000 and $15, respectively:


*Figure 7. An original and reprint of the same Dahmer family photograph, priced $5,000 and $15 respectively (Cult Collectibles).*

These are the same photograph. They look identical. But one has been touched and handled by the Dahmer family, and one has not. Thus it retains an auratic property: The touch of the celebrity-killer and his associates has given it an aura that a photograph itself would not possess. Compare Thornton's observation that the same songs became devalued within the dance subculture once they were transferred from exclusive "white label" records to a "television-advertised compilation album" (1995, 182). The nature of the thing does not confer subcultural capital; the context of production does.

However, if collectibles are rare, they can retail for a slightly higher value even with no physical connection to a killer. Serial Killers Ink offers an "18-inch plush Jeffrey Dahmer doll made by Demented Dollz" for $150,

stressing that "this collectible is extremely hard to find as it has been out of production for many years" (Serial Killers Ink, 2022b). An issue of *Psycho Killers* comic book featuring Ramirez retails for $300 on Serial Killers Ink. In some unusual cases, rarity can even trump touch. For $100,000, seller Redrumautographs at Murder Auction offers the "Theodore Robert Bundy original 10 pages court document stamped and signed from August 7, 1979," claiming, "This is the most important and most significative Ted Bundy court document to ever exist" (Redrumautographs 2022). On this site, sellers and buyers can rate each other: This popular seller has 672 ratings, 99 percent of which are positive, which lends credence to the authenticity of the document. The description goes on: "The details of the crime scene is completely grotesque with more accuracy in this document than anywhere else. It's a one of kind document! [. . .] This document is for the private collector and perhaps museums." If Bundy touched the document, it isn't advertised or noted. The important factor here seems to be that there is only one, that it is original, and that it is apparently in the seller's possession. Suggesting it as a museum piece is also an appeal to a more conventional kind of cultural capital, demonstrating at least some translation between fields of cultural capital.

The cheapest items tended to be only tangentially associated with real killers: For a mere $2, one may purchase an envelope from the Washington Department of Corrections, via Supernaught. Or, not provably authentic, a knot of plastic supposedly tied by killer Richard Clary retails for $3 (Supernaught), but anyone could have made that. Trading cards, figurines, and similar mass-produced items tended to retail under $50, across these sites. One interesting finding, which demonstrates the devaluation of unrestricted information, was an offer on Serial Killers Ink for a link to Dahmer's full confession online, for $10. It offers graphic detail and a length of 243 pages, to be immediately emailed to the buyer after purchase. This looks like an attempt to monetize Thornton's observation that "subcultural capital maintains its currency [. . .] as long as it flows through channels of communication which are subject to varying degrees of restriction" (1995, 161). The problem is that the confession is not restricted, but easily discoverable online, for free. Of course, there is no law against selling things one can find for free, but the fact that the site only attempted to charge $10 for the access suggests some kind of awareness that this strategy probably wasn't going to work. Restricted knowledge is valuable within this market. Knowledge anyone can find in thirty seconds is not.

It seems, then, that the lens of subcultural capital has useful, widespread, and quite traditional application when applied to the collectible aspect of serial killer fandom. Authenticity and rarity produce both economic and subcultural value simultaneously with the celebrity of the killer concerned, and each factor influences the others. The contexts of production are paramount. This aspect of the fandom produces expert and celebrity fans, high in social and symbolic capital, in a way that TikTok and Tumblr spheres do not. Still, we should not eschew the lenses entirely when applying it to these media platforms, but note the adaptations I have drawn attention to regarding circulation, reproduction, curation over possession, and the attachment of subcultural capital to posts rather than users. As a pathologized fandom, the subcultural capital in question here has less direct relation to more mainstream cultural capital than that of bigger, more popular fandoms, but there was a still degree of translation of capital between fields, notably the capital of radical feminism as applied to Wuornos. Information and knowledge from more mainstream sources was also valued within the fannish sphere. TikTok was especially interesting with regard to the valuation of feminine sexual expression, which tends to deplete capital in most fandoms, but here plays into the strategy of appealing to notoriety within a subcultural group. Significantly, however, this lens did not fully account for the presence of humor on any site: Humor and joking can be a tactic of subcultural capital accumulation, but it is also more than that. On which note, I turn now to my final investigative chapter, through the lens of digital play.