

# Intimate Yet Exploitative: Representations of Gender-Based Violence in Platformed True Crime Narratives

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## Abstract

True crime is a highly controversial yet successful entertainment genre that is widely available on streaming, video, and podcast platforms. The content often includes visual depictions of victims and survivors of gender-based violence, as well as depictions of the acts of violence themselves, such as surveillance footage, police or court videos, or photographs. Additionally, producers and account holders on social media platforms frequently use stereotypical, clichéd, and even eroticized representations of violence. True crime formats rarely address neither the structural causes and backgrounds which lead to crimes, nor the impact on victims, survivors, and their relatives. To address these issues, we apply audio-visual content analysis, focusing on the YouTube channel of Bailey Sarian and her content combination of narrating true crime stories while doing her makeup. Drawing on communication and media studies, we explore the dual tenor of subversive-empowering versus voyeuristic-exploitative representations in the context of narratives of gender-based violence. Our analysis highlights that the unreflective and voyeuristic tone of commercialized true crime narratives can lead to the unethical exploitation of real events and the people affected. The Murder, Mystery & Makeup Monday series exemplifies a dual approach, blending affective storytelling, which fosters viewer intimacy, with sensationalistic portrayals that often simplify and stigmatize those involved in criminal cases. Although some empowering and informative voices regarding gender-based violence exist online, they are frequently overshadowed by the sensationalism typical of commercial true crime. The series underscores a tension between intimate engagement and ethical responsibility, shaped by platform-driven pressures that prioritize engagement over quality. Our findings emphasize the need for platforms to actively enable nuanced, balanced portrayals that foster a more informed and empathetic media environment.

## Keywords

affective storytelling; audio-visual content analysis; Bailey Sarian; gender-based violence; platform-culture; true crime; YouTube

## 1. Introduction

The true crime genre has become a commercially successful yet highly controversial area of entertainment, extensively available across various media platforms, including streaming services, video channels, and podcasts. True crime content typically involves detailed depictions of real-life crimes, featuring visual elements such as surveillance footage, police videos, and court recordings. Covering a range of criminal activities, including murder, kidnapping, and fraud, these productions aim to provide comprehensive insights into the circumstances surrounding crimes and the backgrounds of those involved. True crime formats are a hybrid of non-fictional formats, which are based on the reproduction of reality, and fictional formats like re-enacted scenes (Hobbs & Hoffman, 2022; Lemuth, 2017). The non-fictional, informative part—such as the inclusion of crime scenes, people involved, or experts in a specialist field—creates a feeling of authenticity among viewers. A fictional component of true crime often provides an additional entertainment factor.

Despite its popularity, true crime faces significant criticism from both civil society and the academic community. Critics argue that true crime content fosters sensationalism and an unhealthy fascination with violence, often exploiting the suffering of victims and survivors (Cavender et al., 1999). The genre is also criticized for emphasizing dramatic and eroticized representations of violence rather than addressing the structural causes of crime (e.g., Chan, 2020). These portrayals can reinforce harmful stereotypes and contribute to a culture that trivializes and normalizes violence, particularly gender-based violence.

This study focuses on the hybridization of true crime narratives with other entertainment formats and examines how these combinations affect the representation of gender-based violence. Specifically, it analyzes Bailey Sarian's *Murder, Mystery & Makeup Monday* series on YouTube, which uniquely blends true crime storytelling with makeup application. By examining the channel, this study aims to understand whether these representations serve a subversive and empowering purpose or perpetuate voyeuristic narratives. Overall, the primary objectives of this study are to analyze the representation of gender-based violence in Bailey Sarian's series and to explore the ethical implications of commercializing true crime narratives involving gender-based violence.

In pursuit of this objective, we employ an audio-visual content analysis approach as well as narrative analysis. A sample of videos from Bailey Sarian's series over a span of four years is selected to illustrate the evolution of her content and its impact. This methodology allows for a detailed examination of the storytelling techniques, audience engagement strategies, and commercial elements of her videos. The true crime genre, while immensely popular, raises important ethical and societal questions, particularly regarding the portrayal of gender-based violence. By examining Bailey Sarian's *Murder, Mystery & Makeup Monday* series, this study seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on the ethical representation of crime in media and its implications for societal attitudes towards violence and justice.

The manuscript is structured as follows: First, we provide an overview of research on the true crime genre and the representation of gender-based violence in media. We then describe the audio-visual analysis approach, including the selection criteria for the sample videos. Section 4 presents the findings of our analysis and focuses on the audio-visual content, narrative techniques, and the ambivalent nature of true crime representations in Bailey Sarian's videos. Following this, we discuss the findings in relation to the hybrid true crime genre, the ethical implications, and the potential for empowering versus exploitative

content. Finally, we summarize the key findings, address implications for media producers, platforms, and audiences, and provide suggestions for future research.

## 2. True Crime, Affect, and Hybrid Platform Media

### 2.1. True Crime Genre From a Communication and Media Studies Perspective

True crime is a media genre that focuses on real crimes and criminal cases, presented through various formats such as books, films, documentaries, podcasts, and other media forms (e.g., Hobbs & Hoffman, 2022; Lemuth, 2017). The content covers a wide range of crimes, including murder, kidnapping, fraud, and other offenses. True crime often provides a more detailed account of the circumstances leading to a crime and the backgrounds of the perpetrators than other informational formats. Typically, these productions delve into investigations and court proceedings related to the crime, offering insights into the work of criminal investigators, journalists, and the systematic examination of crimes. The term “true crime” gained popularity following the review of Truman Capote’s (1966) non-fiction novel *In Cold Blood*, which meticulously reconstructed the 1959 murders of a farmer’s family in Kansas, creating a novel genre that straddles reportage and narrative writing. The book, often seen as the first modern true crime narrative, set a precedent for how random, senseless violence haunts everyday spaces and perceptions (Linnemann, 2015). True crime media, by placing the horrific within familiar settings, can potentially shape public views on violence, fostering suspect identities and amplifying social insecurities.

There is no universal definition of true crime, as the term now encompasses a variety of multi-media forms and modes, including the highly successful podcast formats. True crime has been a popular TV genre for years, blending entertainment and informational aspects, thus functioning as a hybrid genre between traditional programming categories of information and entertainment (Hobbs & Hoffman, 2022). True crime TV formats are documentaries that address crime and criminality, often depicting real events and shedding light on the backgrounds of crimes, evidence, and investigations. Key features of this genre include:

- Many true crime formats use reenacted, sometimes dramatized, scenes to reconstruct crimes, making them more comprehensible for viewers.
- These formats typically feature interviews with individuals connected to the crime, such as victims, relatives, investigators, lawyers, and witnesses.
- True crime shows often emphasize the detective work involved in solving the case, showcasing how investigators resolved the crime.
- Some formats provide insights into criminal psychology, exploring how perpetrators think and act.
- True crime formats can be highly emotional, as they often deal with extreme crimes and their impact on victims and their families.

Overall, true crime shows have gained immense popularity due to their blend of real crimes, investigative work, and human stories. True crime media plays a critical role in shaping public perceptions of crime, often blurring the line between fact and fiction. Studies reveal that while these narratives are based on real events, they portray a narrow, stylized view of homicide, diverging significantly from typical crime data (Durham et al., 1995). Recent research highlights how true crime media often blend sensationalism with commercial motives, shaping narratives to maximize audience engagement. This commercial emphasis is said to prioritize shock

and drama, which can distort public understanding of crime and exemplify broader trends of commodifying crime stories for profitability (Cornett, 2024).

## ***2.2. Criticism and Concerns Regarding the True Crime Genre From Civil Society and Academia***

There is criticism of the true crime genre from both civil society and academic perspectives, as some argue that it promotes sensationalism and an unhealthy interest in violence. In terms of youth protection, Linke (2023) has been collecting central aspects for the debate in Germany, which can be considered beyond this scope: True crime formats can display explicit or gruesome images or details about crimes that may be excessively frightening and therefore inappropriate or even harmful to children or adolescents. They also may focus on sensationalism by presenting dramatized portrayals of crime and violence. This can glamorize violence, trivialize the suffering and perspectives of victims and survivors, and reduce empathy for them. When true crime shows depict crimes without the necessary historical or cultural context, this can lead to a distorted perception of events and the real world, and an inappropriate portrayal of crimes and the individuals involved. By repeatedly publicizing stories and images, true crime programs can infringe upon the privacy and emotional well-being of crime victims and survivors, particularly when their stories are shared without their consent or without appropriate sensitivity. Regarding commercialization and unrealistic representation of criminal cases, we have the psychopathic perpetrator with fantasies of omnipotence on the one hand, and the compliant, helpless, and mostly female and white victim on the other. This style is often characterized by a tear-jerking basic tone with reenacted scenes that are primarily aimed at fear, horror, and even voyeurism.

Furthermore, there is evidence for disproportional media attention and unequal representation of intersectional categories, especially regarding race and gender (e.g., the so-called “missing white woman syndrome”; Slakoff & Duran, 2023). Issues such as intimate partner violence, sexual offenses, and gender-based violence are often central to true crime shows, addressing the particularly vulnerable area of personal relationships. One of the few international studies on true crime, conducted in the late 1990s, already highlighted how true crime manifests gender stereotypes (Cavender et al., 1999). This raises questions about long-term effects and cultivation: For instance, can true crime increase fear of crime, especially among girls and women? Can crimes in intimate relationships become normalized and violent crimes sensationalized? To what extent do viewers maintain a sense of reality? These questions have been posed by media researchers and youth protectors for years. However, they remain largely unanswered for true crime. Unfortunately, the state of research is still insufficient.

## ***2.3. Media Representation of Gender-Based Violence and Specifics of the True Crime Genre***

Gender-based violence refers to violence committed against an individual based on their gender. This violence can be physical, emotional, or psychological and may take many forms, including domestic violence, sexual violence, stalking, sexual harassment, and discrimination. As defined by the Istanbul Convention of the Council of Europe, gender-based violence is “violence directed against a person because of their biological or social gender” (Council of Europe, 2011, p. 3), highlighting its structural nature and impact. While gender-based violence predominantly affects women and girls, men, boys, and non-binary individuals can also be victims. Often, gender-based violence exists within a broader culture of oppression and discrimination, which reinforces gendered power imbalances. It is thus recognized as a serious human rights

issue that requires proactive efforts to combat and prevent it, including legal measures, survivor support, and public awareness initiatives to address its causes and impacts.

The media portrayal of gender-based violence is crucial, as it can influence public understanding in both positive and negative ways. Effective media coverage can increase awareness about the scope and consequences of gender-based violence, encourage survivors to share their experiences, and prompt public debate. It can even catalyze political and legislative action to address the issue. However, there is a risk that media portrayals will trivialize or sensationalize gender-based violence. Especially in the depiction of sexual violence, media producers sometimes risk presenting it as entertainment or eroticized content rather than as a serious crime (Linke & Kasdorf, 2023). This can contribute to a societal attitude that normalizes or justifies violence against women and girls, as recent civil society discussions and scientific findings underscore.

True crime formats specifically play a significant role in shaping societal issues within the media. The production, reception, and framing of media content are part of complex processes that can make social contexts visible or invisible (Linke & Prommer, 2021; Prommer & Linke, 2019). Audiovisual media, and true crime in particular, have the capacity to either address or overlook the structural roots of violence and to highlight or obscure categories of structural difference such as gender, ethnicity, race, social origin, disability, sexual orientation, or age (Thiele, 2019; Thomas, 2019). The high degree of realism typical of true crime gives these depictions a unique status. International research emphasizes the importance of this realism and the global relevance of violence, especially in connection to gender relations and structural inequalities (e.g., Kaya, 2019; Nettleton, 2011). Despite the complexity of gender-based violence, the considerable public interest in true crime formats reflects a societal desire to engage with these issues. However, understanding gender-based, domestic, and intimate partner violence requires a nuanced approach that considers the historical and behavioral patterns of violent relationships, challenging heteronormative ideas of masculinity and femininity that often underpin violent relationship dynamics (Degele, 2005).

Recent studies have shown that media portrayals frequently fail to critically engage with these patterns, instead often reinforcing them by depicting individuals through stereotypes (Thiele, 2015) and situating gender-based violence within narrow relationship narratives (Linke & Kasdorf, 2023). Of particular concern is the representation of violence in contexts of systemic inequality and resulting discrimination and oppression. A study of Germany's eight main television channels during prime time in 2020 found that gender-based violence was depicted in one-third of all programs (Linke & Kasdorf, 2023). Moreover, the study examined the degree to which victims' perspectives were included in these depictions, revealing that in 51% of cases ( $n = 149$ ), the victim's perspective was either absent or only minimally included. Only 8% ( $n = 22$ ) of cases offered a nuanced portrayal of gender-based violence from the victim's viewpoint. Conversely, some violent acts were not clearly identified as violence, and thus no victim perspective was provided (12%,  $n = 36$ ). These findings illustrate the need for media to adopt a sensitive approach to representing gender-based violence accurately.

For media producers, the responsible portrayal of gender-based violence is crucial to avoid reinforcing harmful stereotypes and structural inequalities rooted in societal acceptance of unequal gender roles. True crime formats, when rigorously researched, can raise awareness and destigmatize survivors by offering diverse perspectives. However, many programs fail to meet this standard, often focusing on sensational aspects, such as reenactments or crime scene footage, without sufficient investigative context. This can

result in media exploitation rather than adherence to journalistic principles, trivializing the complex patterns of violence and their broader societal impacts (Cagle, 2018).

The term gender-based violence underscores that violence committed due to gender is not only a personal tragedy but also a societal failure. In addressing this violence, the language used in media plays a vital role in shaping public perception and understanding. For example, “femicide” emphasizes the systemic, misogynistic elements of gendered violence, underscoring its societal dimensions (Meltzer, 2021, 2022). Sensitive and accurate language is essential to convey the specific nature and gravity of gender-based violence, distinguishing it from other forms of violence, and ensuring that its structural dimensions are recognized. Traditional audiovisual media often struggle to represent gender-based violence thoughtfully. Sensationalist portrayals that prioritize dramatization over depth can trivialize and normalize such violence, failing to capture the complex realities of victims’ experiences and missing opportunities for thoughtful, respectful representation. The voices and perspectives of victims are frequently overshadowed by spectacle, reducing intricate human experiences to mere visuals.

In true crime narratives, attention often focuses more on the perpetrator and the details of their crimes than on the victim’s experience. This focus risks marginalizing victims’ suffering and perspectives. It is critical for such narratives to center victims’ stories, provide them agency, and highlight their experiences to foster a more empathetic and thorough understanding of gender-based violence’s impact (Linke & Kasdorf, 2023). True crime formats rarely include references to prevention, support, or advice for those affected by gender-based violence, which represents a substantial shortcoming. The omission of practical resources fails viewers who might be in similar situations or know someone who is. Including prevention and support information could be instrumental in raising awareness and offering real assistance, as argued by Linke and Kasdorf (2023).

The portrayal of intimate partner violence in true crime shows can be an essential means of raising awareness and informing the public about its effects on victims. It is vital, however, that these formats are carefully designed and presented to avoid glorifying or trivializing violence against women. Reviews show that many programs fail to offer a nuanced perspective on violence patterns and their emergence in relationships, focusing instead on the violent act itself and the stereotypical categorization of those involved (Linke & Kasdorf, 2023). Reenactments, crime scene footage, or interviews with witnesses or acquaintances often emphasize the horror of the acts without a thorough investigation, ultimately serving as media exploitation of available material rather than adhering to the documentary and journalistic principle of newsworthiness (Cagle, 2018; Cornett, 2024). Thus, it remains crucial for media producers to portray gender-based violence with care and responsibility to reflect its true impact. Sensationalist portrayals that rely on stereotypes or one-dimensional depictions can reinforce the structural causes of gender-based violence embedded in societal acceptance of unequal gender roles. True crime formats that are rigorously researched and offer diverse perspectives can play a pivotal role in increasing public understanding, destigmatizing survivors, and contributing to efforts to combat and prevent gender-based violence (Murley, 2019).

#### ***2.4. Self-Representation, Content Creation, and Ethics on Platformed Media***

Contemporary research highlights the complex and multifaceted processes through which online creators cultivate intimacy, navigate audience expectations, and engage in various forms of labor to sustain their

visibility and connection with followers. Marwick (2015) notes that the rise of social media allows niche personalities to cultivate large followings, but without the financial security traditionally associated with celebrity. This shift places heightened emotional and relational demands on creators, whose work is frequently undervalued and financially unrewarding. Raun (2018) expands on this by proposing the concept of “subcultural microcelebrity” to explore how creators, through affective labor, perform authenticity, accessibility, and connectedness, all of which are foundational to audience relationships on social media. This performative intimacy serves as a form of social capital, offering creators pathways to monetization, recognition, and advocacy, though often at a personal cost.

Peltari (2022) provides further insight into the communicative strategies used by Spanish YouTubers to navigate sensitive topics. Through affective narratives characterized by self-disclosure, explicit emotion, and stance-taking, these creators engage audiences by constructing a “stance-continuum,” transitioning from self-oriented perspectives to broader, community-centered stances. This progressive positioning allows creators to serve as informal influencers within their digital communities, blending personal narratives with instructive content.

In the true crime fandom, as Gaynor (2023) observes, social media engagement fosters an environment where fans can collectively consume and discuss violent narratives. Rather than critically engaging with the ethical implications of true crime, fans often seek in-group validation and self-promotion within these spaces, gathering around crime content in ways that audiences are drawn to trauma and violence. Expanding on these dynamics, Glatt (2023) examines the “emotional” and “relational labor” required of content creators, highlighting the uneven challenges faced by marginalized creators, who are more susceptible to harassment and forced to navigate what she terms an “intimacy triple bind.” These creators must balance visibility with self-protection, employing strategies like disengaging with negative commenters and creating private community spaces to reduce vulnerability.

Together, these studies underscore the ethical and emotional complexities of self-representation in platformed media, where the pursuit of visibility is intertwined with the risks of overexposure and the commodification of personal experiences. Furthermore, they contribute to a turn to affect and emotion in media and communication studies, emphasizing the ways in which media produce, communicate, and shape emotions and affects in audiences (Lünenborg & Maier, 2018). This perspective highlights the role of affect and emotion as driving forces in contemporary media, particularly as they intersect with structures of difference and power.

Given these issues, it is crucial for media producers to responsibly and sensitively portray gender-based violence to convey an accurate picture of its impacts. Superficial, stereotypical, and one-sided portrayals can perpetuate the structural causes of gender-based violence rooted in unequal gender roles and their acceptance. True crime formats that are well-researched and provide diverse perspectives can contribute to raising awareness, destigmatizing victims, and preventing gender-based violence. These studies underscore the nuanced and often challenging landscape of content creation within platformed media, particularly in genres like true crime, where the interplay between audience engagement, platform requirements, and ethical responsibilities is complex. This raises two pivotal questions for this research: How do true crime creators navigate these dynamics? And what strategies do they employ to meet platform demands while weighing against ethical considerations?

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Data Collection, Selection, and Sample Overview

In order to find answers to these two questions, we applied a qualitative approach to a media content analysis of true crime content on the most popular video platform, YouTube. The landscape of true crime on YouTube is populated with numerous creators who focus on true crime cases, each employing unique methods to attract and engage their audience. Among these creators, some adopt more spectacular approaches to increase their viewership and subscriber base. For instance, Stephanie Soo combines true crime narratives with mukbang (eating shows), while others incorporate ASMR (autonomous sensory meridian response) into their true crime content. For this study, we focus on one of the most popular true-crime series on YouTube, hosted by Los Angeles-based Bailey Sarian. Sarian's channel, which has been active since 2015, gained significant traction with her series *Murder, Mystery & Makeup Monday* with over seven million subscribers as of today. The format involves Sarian applying makeup while narrating true crime stories. This unique combination has set her apart, leading to high viewership, with some videos reaching up to 26 million views and most ranging between three and eight million views. Videos are uploaded every few weeks, with the latest one, as noted at the time of this publication, dated October 28th, 2024.

As this analysis aims to understand her format, storytelling techniques, and the development of content creators' strategies over time, we decided to focus on Bailey Sarian exclusively and include a relevant time frame. Since the videos are relatively long (from 25 to 40 minutes) and we needed to include the entire content in order to analyze the narrative strategies in full, we decided to focus on a relatively small sample size: In this study, we analyzed five videos from Bailey Sarian's *Murder, Mystery & Makeup Monday* series over a span of four years. These videos were selected to illustrate the development of Sarian's content and provide insights into the true crime genre on YouTube. Their choice was based on their significance in showcasing changes in her presentation style, audience engagement, and the commercial aspects of her channel. For the list and summary of analyzed videos from Bailey Sarian's *Murder, Mystery & Makeup Monday* series, see Boxes 1–5.

#### Box 1. Video #1: "Chris Watts—2000 Page Discovery Murder, Mystery & Makeup | Bailey Sarian."

- Upload Date: January 15, 2019
- Views: 11,691,757 (dated on October 28, 2024)
- Likes: 256k (dated on October 28, 2024)
- Duration: 27 minutes 37 seconds
- Advertisements: 2 ads before the video

This video marked the beginning of Bailey Sarian's significant rise in popularity. It presents the case of Chris Watts, providing a detailed narrative while Sarian applies makeup.



**Box 2. Video #2: “Genesee River Monster, Arthur Shawcross. One Of The Worst Killers. Mystery & Makeup GRWM Bailey Sarian.”**

- Upload Date: February 10, 2020
- Views: 5,197,677 (dated on October 28, 2024)
- Likes: 140k (dated on October 28, 2024)
- Duration: 24 minutes 46 seconds
- Advertisements: 2 ads before the video, affiliate links

This video features the story of Arthur Shawcross, also known as the Genesee River Monster. The format includes ads and affiliate links, indicating the beginning of Sarian’s move towards more commercial content.

**Box 3. Video #3: “Best Friends For Life ?? What Happened To Sarah Stern ? Mystery & Makeup Bailey Sarian.”**

- Upload Date: July 5, 2021
- Views: 8,210,672 (dated on October 28, 2024)
- Likes: 260k (dated on October 28, 2024)
- Duration: 39 minutes 36 seconds
- Advertisements: 2 ads before the video, sponsoring ad, affiliate links

This video discusses the case of Sarah Stern, highlighting the friendship dynamics and the crime involved. It includes multiple forms of ads, showing further commercialization of her content.

**Box 4. Video #4: “The Suspish Sitter—Helen Patricia Moore | Mystery & Makeup—Bailey Sarian.”**

- Upload Date: October 24, 2022
- Views: 4,663,137 (dated on October 28, 2024)
- Likes: 137k (dated on October 28, 2024)
- Duration: 34 minutes 49 seconds
- Advertisements: 2 ads before the video, sponsoring ad, affiliate links

In this video, Sarian narrates the story of Helen Patricia Moore, with a focus on her suspicious activities as a babysitter. The structure includes various ads and sponsorships, maintaining her commercial strategy.

**Box 5. Video #5: “A Sicko Serial Killer and NEVER CAUGHT !?! Jack the Ripper pt 1 | Mystery & Makeup | Bailey Sarian.”**

- Upload Date: July 24, 2023
- Views: 3,008,856 (dated on October 28, 2024)
- Likes: 85k (dated on October 28, 2024)
- Duration: 49 minutes 18 seconds
- Advertisements: 2 ads before the video, sponsoring ad, affiliate links

This video delves into the infamous Jack the Ripper case, presented in a more subjective and engaging manner. It includes comprehensive advertising elements, reflecting the mature stage of Sarian’s content development. Unusually, this story is split into two videos, which could lead to a higher re-engagement rate.

### **3.2. Audio-Visual Content Analysis**

To systematically examine the narrative and stylistic elements of Bailey Sarian’s Murder, Mystery & Makeup Monday series, this study employed a structured audio-visual content analysis following Mikos’ approach (2023). First, a systematic deductive–inductive coding process was implemented, focusing on capturing a range of dimensions relevant to the true crime genre on YouTube. Specifically, the coding framework included categories for media genre conventions, stylistic devices, elements of representation, and aesthetic choices, as well as narrative structure. These categories allowed us to dissect the unique ways in which Sarian combines storytelling with performative aspects, such as makeup application, which is integral to her narrative style and engagement with audiences.

Two coders conducted the analysis to enhance reliability and reduce individual bias. To ensure methodological rigor and consistency in coding, communication and consensual coding techniques, as proposed by Kuckartz (2018), were utilized. This involved iterative discussions between the two coders to clarify coding categories, reach a consensus on ambiguous segments, and refine the coding framework throughout the analysis process. This collaborative approach to coding strengthened inter-coder reliability, ensuring that both coders maintained consistency in applying codes across the dataset and validating the findings.

The analysis further involved steps of analytic coding, which moved beyond descriptive categorization to develop theoretical insights and explore deeper conceptual connections within the content. Analytic coding allowed the coders to capture the interplay between visual and verbal elements in Sarian’s videos, identifying how these aspects converge to construct a cohesive narrative. For instance, her use of pacing, voice modulation, and camera focus contributes to creating an immersive atmosphere, while her verbal cues guide viewers’ emotional responses to the content. This dual approach—integrating both deductive and inductive coding phases—ensured a comprehensive analysis, capturing both expected and emergent themes in the data.

In sum, this combination of systematic deductive–inductive coding, collaboration between two coders for reliability, and analytic coding for theoretical depth provided a robust framework to unpack the distinctive

features of Sarian’s true crime series. This methodology enabled us to capture the intricacies of her storytelling approach, highlighting how genre conventions, narrative strategies, and aesthetic choices intersect.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Structure and Storytelling Techniques

The Murder, Mystery & Makeup Monday series by Bailey Sarian is a hybrid format that blends well-known “get ready with me” elements with true crime storytelling. Each episode follows a consistent structure designed to engage and retain viewer attention:

- Introduction: Sarian opens each episode by introducing herself and the show’s concept, immediately creating a familiar atmosphere for returning viewers.
- Theme song: A brief intro song establishes the thematic mood for the episode.
- Small talk: Sarian engages her audience with brief personal anecdotes, which helps establish a relatable, informal tone.
- Advertisement: Recently, a sponsorship segment has been incorporated, lasting about two and a half minutes, reflecting Sarian’s strategy of balancing monetization with content delivery.
- Storytelling with makeup application: The primary segment features Sarian narrating a true crime story while applying makeup. This multitasking approach blends the ordinary with the macabre, setting the scene and providing context for each case.
- Conclusion: Sarian wraps up by summarizing the case, sharing personal reflections, and signing off with safety reminders like “be safe out there” and “make good choices,” reinforcing a sense of care and community with her audience.

Sarian’s storytelling approach combines both expressive non-verbal cues and interactive language, building a rapport with viewers that feels genuine and immersive. Her facial expressions—from a dramatic eye roll to an amused smile—add emotional depth to her narrative, often signaling her own stance on the content (e.g., “sicko serial killer”). Through gestures like leaning forward during climactic moments or expressive arm movements, she emphasizes key points in the story, while casual actions like playing with her hair enhance the sense of intimacy and relatability.

Her narrative style departs from traditional true crime reporting, with a casual tone and conversational language that draws viewers in. Rather than straightforwardly recounting details, she often speaks as if she were present in the story, using first names and informal language to make the characters and situations more accessible. Colloquial expressions, such as “hell fucking no” or “are you kidding me?” punctuate her storytelling, while frequently rhetorical, sometimes even suggestive and ironic questions like “or is it just me?” and “weird, right?,” invite viewers to react and engage, fostering a communal experience where viewers feel like they are part of the discussion.

In addition to these verbal techniques, Sarian employs formal production elements to create an immersive experience. Zoom-ins during tense moments highlight dramatic details. The use of disclaimers and trigger warnings seems to show at least some sensitivity to viewers’ vulnerability. Her use of cuts maintains the pacing, ensuring that the narrative remains engaging without digression. Occasionally, she adds subdued background

music that enhances the eerie atmosphere without overwhelming the story. These elements combine to create a setting where viewers feel as though they are sharing a personal conversation with Sarian, making the story feel like “the latest gossip” rather than a distant recounting of events. Through this blend of structured storytelling and authentic interaction, the content creator navigates platform demands by maintaining high engagement while fostering intimacy. Her approach to audience interaction, balanced content structuring, and use of relatable language exemplify the strategies creators employ to sustain viewer interest.

#### **4.2. Channel and Content Evolution: From Research to Branding-Driven Narratives**

Bailey Sarian’s Murder, Mystery & Makeup Monday series has undergone considerable changes in production quality over time, a shift that aligns with her expanding commercial success on YouTube. Initially, her videos featured simple cuts, basic lighting, and straightforward camera angles. However, as her channel grew, these aspects became increasingly professionalized, with more polished visuals, advanced lighting techniques, and high-definition audio that contribute to a seamless viewing experience. This enhancement in production quality supports a brand-oriented presentation that appeals to a broad audience, elevating the series from amateur content to a commercially viable product.

Branding also plays a key role in Sarian’s strategic approach. Her thumbnails have become more standardized and visually cohesive, while her titles have shifted to more attention-seeking phrases, such as “A Sick Serial Killer and NEVER CAUGHT?!?” These changes reflect a deliberate attempt to capitalize on viewer interest, optimizing content presentation for maximum engagement and click-through rates. Such strategies suggest a clear focus on leveraging visual elements as tools of attraction, which are essential in a highly competitive platform environment.

Sarian’s storytelling techniques have also evolved, moving away from a straightforward recounting of true crime cases toward a more personalized, opinion- and judgment-driven narrative that deepens viewer engagement. Initially, her content included citations and source-based reporting, emphasizing factual recounting. However, over time, her narrative style has shifted to include more subjective elements, with frequent digressions, personal reflections, and casual remarks (e.g., “I was very invested [in the case]. It was sickening”). This increasingly subjective approach appears designed to cultivate a sense of intimacy and camaraderie with viewers, who are invited to share in her reactions and judgments. Her use of informal language (e.g., “hell fucking no,” “or is it just me?”) further enhances this effect, creating a conversational tone that blurs the lines between reporting and personal commentary.

Additionally, Sarian’s storytelling employs highly expressive gestures and facial cues, often drawing viewers deeper into the story through her use of pauses, dramatic emphasis, and even rhetorical questioning. This shift towards a more performative narrative approach reflects an underlying strategy to maintain audience attention, using emotional and performative tactics that resemble traditional entertainment formats more than objective storytelling. These choices suggest a calculated balance between engaging content and commercial viability, as Sarian leverages her personality as a primary driver of the channel’s appeal.

The commercialization of Sarian’s channel is particularly evident in the strategic use of sponsorships, advertising, and self-promotion, indicating a significant shift from amateur content creation to a monetized platform presence. Initially, her videos were largely free from direct advertising, but as her popularity and

subscriber base grew, sponsorships and product placements became integral to her content. Recent videos feature sponsorship segments, such as a nearly two-minute ad for Casetify, as well as pre-roll ads and affiliate links in the description. These commercial elements, while profitable, contribute to an increasing fragmentation of content, where viewer attention is divided between the narrative and promotional materials.

Sarian's brand expansion extends beyond YouTube, encompassing self-promotion through social media channels, including Instagram and TikTok, and a personal merchandise line prominently displayed in her videos. This integration of branded content and affiliate links reflects a broader strategy to capitalize on her growing visibility, using multiple revenue streams that transform her personal brand into a business venture. While these strategies serve to strengthen her financial base, they also highlight the potential tension between viewer engagement and the prioritization of monetization, raising questions about the ethical implications of commercializing true crime content.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion: Intimate yet Exploitative

The Murder, Mystery & Makeup Monday series employs affective storytelling and a relational tone that fosters a sense of intimacy between the host and her audience. By sharing personal anecdotes and using expressive body language, Sarian creates an emotionally engaging environment that draws viewers into the narratives. This affective storytelling technique enhances viewer connection, making the audience feel personally involved in the stories. The strategic use of affective storytelling and relational engagement reflects the characteristics of “subcultural microcelebrity” as described by Raun (2018), where creators rely on performative intimacy and emotional labor to foster audience connection. The conversational style and the integration of makeup application serve to humanize the content, making the complex and often distressing subject matter more accessible and relatable.

Despite the engaging nature of Sarian's storytelling, her videos often resort to stereotypical and stigmatizing characterizations of victims and offenders. These portrayals can reinforce harmful stereotypes and contribute to the stigmatization of individuals involved in criminal cases. As Gaynor (2023) observes, true crime communities can prioritize in-group validation over critical discourse, creating an environment where stigmatizing portrayals of individuals in criminal cases may go unchecked, fostering a culture of “wound consumption.” Victims are frequently depicted too superficially to really enable viewers to be empathic, while offenders are often characterized as inherently evil or monstrous. This binary portrayal fails to address the complexities of human behavior and the socio-economic and psychological factors that contribute to criminal activity and the systematic causes of violence, thereby simplifying and sensationalizing the true crime narratives.

A significant ethical concern in Sarian's content is the depiction of gender-based and sexual violence without adequate contextualization, education, or advocacy. These narratives are often presented for their shock value, lacking the necessary background information that would educate viewers on the broader societal issues underlying such violence. Without providing context or advocating for prevention and support measures, these depictions risk normalizing and trivializing serious issues of gender-based violence. This approach can desensitize viewers and perpetuate harmful attitudes towards victims and survivors of such violence, as well as retraumatize affected individuals and their families (Chan, 2020). The practice of personal disclosure in the context of gender-based violence risks the “intimacy triple bind” (Glatt, 2023),

where creators must navigate pressures to remain relatable while balancing ethical constraints and the potential for audience overidentification.

The logic of regular content production, driven by platform algorithms, significantly influences Sarian's content strategy. This dynamic underscores Marwick's (2015) observation that social media creators, operating without the financial security of traditional celebrity, often prioritize engagement metrics over content quality due to the heightened emotional and relational demands placed upon them. To maintain visibility and engagement on platforms like YouTube, creators must adhere to a consistent posting schedule that aligns with algorithmic demands. This necessity can lead to a focus on quantity over quality, with content potentially being rushed or sensationalized to meet the algorithmic criteria for engagement. The pressure to produce regular content can also impact the depth and rigor of the research, as creators might prioritize content that is likely to generate views and interactions over thorough and balanced storytelling.

The findings from this analysis suggest a need for greater ethical considerations in the production of true crime content. Content creators should strive to present balanced and nuanced portrayals of all individuals involved in criminal cases, avoiding sensationalism and stereotyping. Additionally, there is a crucial need for contextualizing narratives of gender-based and sexual violence, including educational elements and advocacy for prevention and support. It is not only individual content creators who are called to account, but especially the platforms themselves, which establish the very conditions under which content is created. Platforms have a societal responsibility to reconsider their algorithmic structures, ensuring they support content that prioritizes quality and ethical storytelling over purely engagement-driven metrics. Given the profound influence and financial success of these platforms, civil society demands that they act responsibly and rethink their priorities. It is imperative that states worldwide enforce these standards, ensuring that platforms uphold ethical obligations alongside their pursuit of profit.

In alignment with recent findings, this study underscores a pressing need for more balanced portrayals within true crime narratives (Marwick, 2015; Raun, 2018). Implementing context-sensitive, informative, and nuanced approaches would not only address the risks of sensationalism but also foster a responsible media environment that more accurately represents the complexities of crime, violence, and justice and the human experiences connected to them. By addressing these issues, true crime content can evolve to provide not only compelling narratives but also responsible and informative discussions about crime and justice. This approach can contribute to a more informed and empathetic audience, ultimately fostering a healthier media environment and more informed societies.

Bailey Sarian's *Murder, Mystery & Makeup Monday* series epitomizes the duality of the true crime genre's evolution on digital platforms. On one hand, Sarian has innovatively created a hybrid genre that combines intimate storytelling with expressive facial and makeup artistry, thus personalizing and humanizing the narratives. This approach fosters a unique connection between the creator and her audience, drawing viewers into a shared experience that blends entertainment with a personal touch. On the other hand, the series also exemplifies the voyeuristic and exploitative tendencies inherent in true crime narratives, particularly concerning gender-based violence. The sensationalist portrayal of violent acts and the often stereotypical characterization of victims and offenders can desensitize viewers and perpetuate harmful stereotypes. Moreover, the economic imperatives driven by platform algorithms necessitate a regular production schedule, which can prioritize engagement metrics over the ethical representation of content.

This duality underscores a critical tension in the genre: the potential for innovative, engaging content that fosters viewer intimacy and connection versus the ethical pitfalls of exploiting sensitive subjects for entertainment. Addressing this tension requires a balance between creative expression and responsible storytelling, ensuring that true crime content can inform and engage audiences without compromising ethical standards. Ultimately, creators like Sarian must navigate these complexities to contribute to a more thoughtful and conscientious media landscape. YouTube, at a minimum, seems to have acknowledged this as a problem: In more recent content, automated crisis resource panels and references to telephone counseling are displayed. Additionally, a panel announcing “includes paid promotion” is briefly shown by the platform. Future research should address these developments and examine how beneficial these actions are.

While this study focuses on Bailey Sarian’s Murder, Mystery & Makeup Monday series, similar dynamics of affective engagement and ethical concerns are evident across the genre. However, as this research relies on a single case, further studies examining diverse creators and content types are necessary to generalize these findings. Additionally, research into empowering and educational true crime formats—often with less reach than sensationalized content—is essential to support a more responsible media landscape.

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