

## **Tumblr: Where *Everyone's* Got Groupies**

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"He kinda cute tho," a blog that idolizes Parkland school shooter, Nikolas Cruz, is only one amongst the many dark fandoms that can be found plastered on the walls of Tumblr. They call themselves "Cruzers," but they are not alone; these communities coexist with others in support of a variety of famous killers, including Charles Manson, Ted Bundy, and Jeffrey Dahmer. But how is it that anyone could idolize a murderer? Outsiders regard these fandoms as incomprehensible and obscene, but to members, they provide an outlet for expression by the rest of popular media. In this essay, I begin with psychological evidence that explains why the human mind is able to regard mass and serial killers in a positive light. Then, with evidence from various blogs I both observed and interviewed, I explain how emotional facilitation and group mentality may lead one to join a fandom in support of them.

The human brain is constantly making connections that are unseen by the conscious mind. When in contact with another person, these connections allow us to answer the question: are they friend or foe? Waytz and Young, as cited by the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, explain that in social situations, our minds are predisposed to seek affiliation with who we determine to be a friend, and to monitor and anticipate the actions of those we deem foe (278). In their study they found that when evaluating the potential for social connection, people tend to focus on others' feelings and emotions, but if we feel the need to anticipate dangerous actions, we evaluate their intentions (282). But what happens, psychologically, when we attempt to evaluate the mind of someone we will never meet? When deciding whether or not to seek affiliation with a murderer, we need not anticipate their actions nor evaluate their intentions when there is no chance of face to face interaction ever occurring. This means the choice of affiliation can be solely determined based on an analysis of the murderer's emotions, and if one experiences a significant emotional connection with a killer, they are vulnerable to regarding them as friend, rather than foe. This is not to say that just because you relate to the feelings of a murderer, you instantly

view them in a positive light, but rather that the absence of potential for physical interaction allows you to do so. Moving forward, I will discuss how strong emotional connections can motivate one to join a fandom in support of a murderer.

Connecting to another individual on an emotional level is imperative to the development of relationships as well as the decision to form one with a murderer. One might choose to seek affiliation with a murderer if they can relate to their character as portrayed through media, and thus join a fandom to discuss and support them. Because these individuals will never come into physical contact with famous killers, as they are either dead or imprisoned for life, they are left to make assumptions based on what the media chooses to present. Some scholars believe that fans of criminals are created by a fascination with what people do not understand rather than what they can relate to. Namely, Christine M. Sarteschi, Associate Professor of Social Work and Criminology, claims that true-crime narratives focus so much public attention on murderers because they illustrate hardships "that most people never experience in their own lives" (2). While I agree that viewers are initially drawn to these stories by their curiosity, this claim does not explain the continued devotion exhibited by the members of online fandoms.

These narratives have a much more significant effect than appealing to curiosity; they facilitate an emotional bond between the viewer and the murderer being depicted. For example, popular film *My Friend Dahmer*, and TV show *Manhunt: Unabomber*, portray Jeffrey Dahmer and Ted Kaczynski as mistreated, troubled souls, making it difficult not to feel some level of empathy for the characters. Other narratives spark compassion by merely reporting on challenging aspects of killers' lives and can be found both presently and within the archives of news outlets. I argue though that momentarily feeling sorry for a murderer could not be enough to forgive such abhorrent crimes. Instead, one must relate to their emotions to consistently regard them with sympathy. This, likely in combination with varying degrees of mental instability, can inspire admiration for criminals who struggle with one's same, troubling emotions.

Public examples of this phenomenon can be found on Tumblr, where many users openly express their affection for various killers. For example, many murderer-supporting blogs post photos of love letters they

have sent to the killers they admire. Scholars like Sarteschi, who believe murder interest derives from a fascination with the unknown, would likely assume that these blogs are intended to explore what people do not understand, rather than what they are able to relate to. But as evidenced by Harrysimpact<sup>1</sup>, these blogs have no interest in discovering what makes them different from the killers they feature: "Nikolas is an outcast, like us. The outcasts, we have to save our fucking selves man." Though interest in the unknown might explain mere fascination, Sarteschi's argument is incomprehensive because it does not recognize individuals like these who become fans of killers due to experiences and emotions that they *share*.

Nikolas Cruz, Parkland school shooter, is quite popular amongst these fandoms. Because details of Cruz's struggle with social rejection became public knowledge (via multiple news outlets), strong, emotional connections to him can be formed by those who share a similar social identity. According to Karina Korostelina, Professor at George Mason's School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, "Social identity is based on the belief that a person belongs to a particular group, shares common ideas, values, and feelings with other group members, and differs significantly from members of other social groups" (216). I would not argue that supporters necessarily have the same values as their icon, but it is evident in these blogs that a deep understanding of their emotions and shared feelings of isolation can cause individuals to seek affiliation with killers that share similar social identities.

Websites like Tumblr offer a platform that allows users to discuss these feelings through mass murderer and serial killer fandoms; thus, fostering emotional connection not only with the killer but also with peers who feel the same. In a survey conducted by Lisa Smylie, Ph.D., participants claimed to have stronger relationships with those they were able to connect to emotionally. Furthermore, these relationships need not be based on positive emotions, and according to Smylie, they can also be "...fostered within an emotionally 'negative' climate" (143). The influence of the emotionally negative climate surrounding mass and serial killer empathizers is proliferated by the dissenting voice of the media. When big-name news outlets like *The Washington Post* publish quotes like "It scares

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<sup>1</sup> The username of a fan page I discovered a blog post from.

me. It's perverted" (Rosenberg), about these sympathizers, they unknowingly strengthen a bond founded on being outcasts of society. These comments have powerful impacts on an individual's emotions, and as noted by Bialostok and Aronson<sup>2</sup>, emotions are capable of "...preventing the mind from functioning objectively and rationally" (96), and therefore, could facilitate the aberrant decision to join one of these fandoms. Furthermore, based on the research of Korostelina, who found that "insults can strengthen in-group/out-group boundaries and can escalate conflict" (227), I regard these comments as vehicles that intensify the common bond of shame that is central to this group's social identity. In fact, when I asked a creator of one of these blogs if these comments made them want to be any less involved in their community, they responded with "more, if anything" (alright-Cruz<sup>3</sup>).

Blogs like these place a high emphasis on maintaining a specific social identity, which as explained by Korostelina, has polarizing consequences: "In-group members feel that, by being similar to the out-group, the in-group may lose its essence" (218). This creates an "us vs. them" dynamic, in which the values of in-group members become dependent on opposing those of out-group members. The emotional bond of being a social reject is strengthened through a mutual disdain for a common enemy, in this case, being typical members of society. Thus these fandoms regard mass shooters like Eric Harris and Nikolas Cruz as crusaders of their kind: iconic examples of good people, good people who could have been different if only our society didn't ignore the warning signs of depression, if only we had cared about them just a little more, if only they hadn't been bullied.

Skeptics may say that my explanation is incomprehensive due to the fact that not all mass murderers who were social rejects garner such a fanbase, but what is unique about shooters like Cruz and Harris is that they attacked high schools, where being bullied and outcast by peers is most impactful. By college and beyond, most adults have more to worry about than where they stand socially and are emotionally intelligent enough not to believe that the slaughter of innocent victims should be supported. This can explain why shooters like Stephen Paddock, Las Vegas shooter, and

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<sup>2</sup> As published by the American Anthropological Association

<sup>3</sup> The username of a fan page I interviewed through Tumblr's chat box.

Seung-Hui Cho, Virginia Tech shooter, have not garnered such sympathy. Additionally, those who have murdered children, like Adam Lanza, Sandy Hook shooter, have also been less successful in attaining fans because humans associate children with innocence, making Lanza the bully himself rather than a crusader for those who fall victim to them.

Fandoms such as the ones found on Tumblr are not just created for any killer, but rather those whose identities can be used as an explanation for their crimes. High school shooters are so prevalent in fandom media because they tend to be so close to the age of those who create them and are therefore more relatable to users. These shooters are extreme examples of the actions one might be driven to take when they are not accepted by or continuously feel different from their peers. They also give victims of bullying a platform to capitalize on the destruction that they believe is a product of bullying, and can use the death of innocent civilians as a symbol of caution to motivate others to prevent it from occurring in the future:

Usually these mass murderers have some type of mental illness, so like Nikolas for example. He had these mental illnesses and he obviously needed help for them but no one actually did anything. Everyone here seems to support the idea of providing mental help for the ones who were failed in their life, whether it be by the system, their families, or even classmates (nikolasjc<sup>4</sup>).

To users like nikolasjc, these massacres represent an opportunity to raise awareness for those who are impacted by mental illness. This account also briefly features other high school shooters, Eric Harris, Dylan Klebold, and TJ Lane, all of whom have been described by the media as social rejects.

Other skeptics have argued that mass shooters lack the capacity that serial killers have to generate continued interest from the public: While the interest may be intense shortly after a massacre, it quickly fades. Some refer to this as the routinization of mass murder. Although it has not been thoroughly tested empirically, recent analyses of Google Trends data supports the notion that mass killings have become routine and that the American public is

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<sup>4</sup> The username of a fan page I interviewed through Tumblr's chat box.

becoming desensitized to these violent events. (Sarteschi 2) Though I agree that famous serial killers like Jeffery Dahmer are more likely to attract a broader fanbase, I have found evidence that for many, their intense interest in mass murderers is not short lived. For instance, one blogger I interviewed, who requested to remain anonymous, informed me that they think about Cruz an average of three hours per day. Over a month after the attack, and this individual continues to spend over an eighth of their day just thinking about the killer, and even more time posting about him and communicating with other blogs centered around him. This quote shows that although mass shooters may have fewer fans than serial killers, the interest of their fans does not lessen in intensity quickly after their attack, and they exhibit consistent devotion to their idols in order to adhere to their shared social identity.

Though social identity explains what may drive an individual to connect with murderers as well as other members of these fandoms, it does not fully explain what phenomenon causes one to join and participate in them. I argue that the theory of groupthink provides insight into an individual's decision to associate with and contribute to murder fandoms. Irving Janis originally coined the term "groupthink" as a way to explain why policymakers often blindly agree on important decisions without rational consideration, but it has more recently been applied by scholars to explain the mentality of groups outside the political sphere. According to Janis, groupthink is "a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the members' strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action" (Hart 247). Moving forward, I will use this theory to explain why isolated individuals, such as the ones who join these fandoms, consistently place their membership in these communities above their values.

When influenced by a group, individuals tend to disassociate with their own personal values. Modern psychology explains that group think often leads individual members to forget and ignore their morals, mature judgment, and ability to recognize consequences to actions (Hinshelwood<sup>5</sup>). In the context of murder fandoms, this information presents both good and bad news. Fortunately, this may mean that these blogs do not fully represent the logic of individuals that create them; that

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<sup>5</sup> Professor of Psychoanalytic Studies at the University of Essex.

if taken out of their group context, they would no longer be able to justify what they post.

To test my assumption, I asked an individual why they had put a heart symbol next to the name of a mass murderer on their blog title. I found countless blogs with hearts by killers' names, but I specifically chose to ask this question of the only blogger who requested to remain anonymous. Their response was truly nonsensical: "to attract people to look at my page, most people don't want to learn about the victims just the gunman (but) I post information about both." By removing this individual from the context of their group, I argue that because they were stripped of the usual group mentality they experience on this website, they were reminded of their *own* character; and thus, unable to explain the rationale behind their actions. Moreover, this is the same account that assured me they were not a "fan" of Nikolas Cruz, despite the abundance of hand-drawn portraits and love letters of him featured on their page. To further test my theory, I asked nikolascruzedits<sup>6</sup> what made them a fan of Cruz, to which they replied "If you can't tell most things I do are based off of sarcasm I don't consider myself apart of this fan base I am kind of mocking it and the sick children that decide to join this community," but much like the other account, their response was incongruent with what they featured on their page.

What I found most interesting is that no individual was willing to acknowledge that they were a "fan," but all were perfectly comfortable admitting that they were part of a fandom. This is discouraging because though it supports that these individuals' morals are likely more intact than the fandom they belong to, it also reveals how powerful the mindset it creates can be. This claim is evidenced by an interviewee, who moments after claiming they were not a fan, expressed how their membership in this *fandom* is like having a family. So, what makes these individuals so willing to participate in these communities? I argue that these communities are so important to their members because each shares a common bond of being different. It is likely troubling to them to feel such a deep emotional connection to a killer, and the hate they receive for feeling this way can only further instill a disconnect to society:

Many of us know that its not "normal" to like these sort of things (murders & mass shooters) so we keep it on the down

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<sup>6</sup> The username of a fan page I interviewed through Tumblr's chat box.

low or dont reveal our identities here... Its so strange to most that we find these killers psychology interesting that we need to stick together or no one else will be there for us (dylandeadbolt<sup>7</sup>)

Because they are the minority in their beliefs, they experience more rejection than most and therefore place a higher value on creating an identity consistent with fellow minorities (Dundes<sup>8</sup> 150). This is not to say that these blogs should be excused of their offensive posts, but rather that many of them may be a desperate attempt to belong somewhere in society. Unfortunately, group mentality cannot disprove that members of these fandoms genuinely believe in the messages they promote, but it may show that when users are removed from their community, they are at least conscious that their actions are morally flawed.

Through shared social identities, the individuals I interviewed and otherwise observed on Tumblr forge emotional connections with both murderers and other members of the site who share this bond. These connections foster a community, or a fandom that is facilitated by a group mentality that motivates members to further separate themselves from those who do not exhibit the same social characteristics as those demonstrated by in-group members. The fandoms I analyze in this piece are prevalent examples of how powerful emotional and social connections can be to those who have been outcast by society. They explain that though members of these groups demonstrate erroneous, misguided morals, more caution should be taken when criticizing them in order to avoid pushing them further into such deviant communities. There has been no scholarly work to date which discusses murder fandoms native to Tumblr, and I implore scholars to join my conversation to further uncover what might cause one to openly show support for mass and serial killers.

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<sup>8</sup> The username of a fan page I interviewed through Tumblr's chat box.

<sup>9</sup> Folklorist at the University of California, Berkeley





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