# FROM SENSATIONALISTS TO CRITICAL MINDS:
EXPLORING CONSUMERS' FASCINATION WITH TRUE CRIME PODCASTS

Drawing on in-depth interviews with consumers and Katz's (1993) notions on evil, **this research project explores consumers' fascination with true crime podcasts.** Our preliminary findings reveal that consumers fascination with true crime is grounded in true crime narratives that **facilitate critical reflections on prevalent notions of good and evil in contemporary society.**
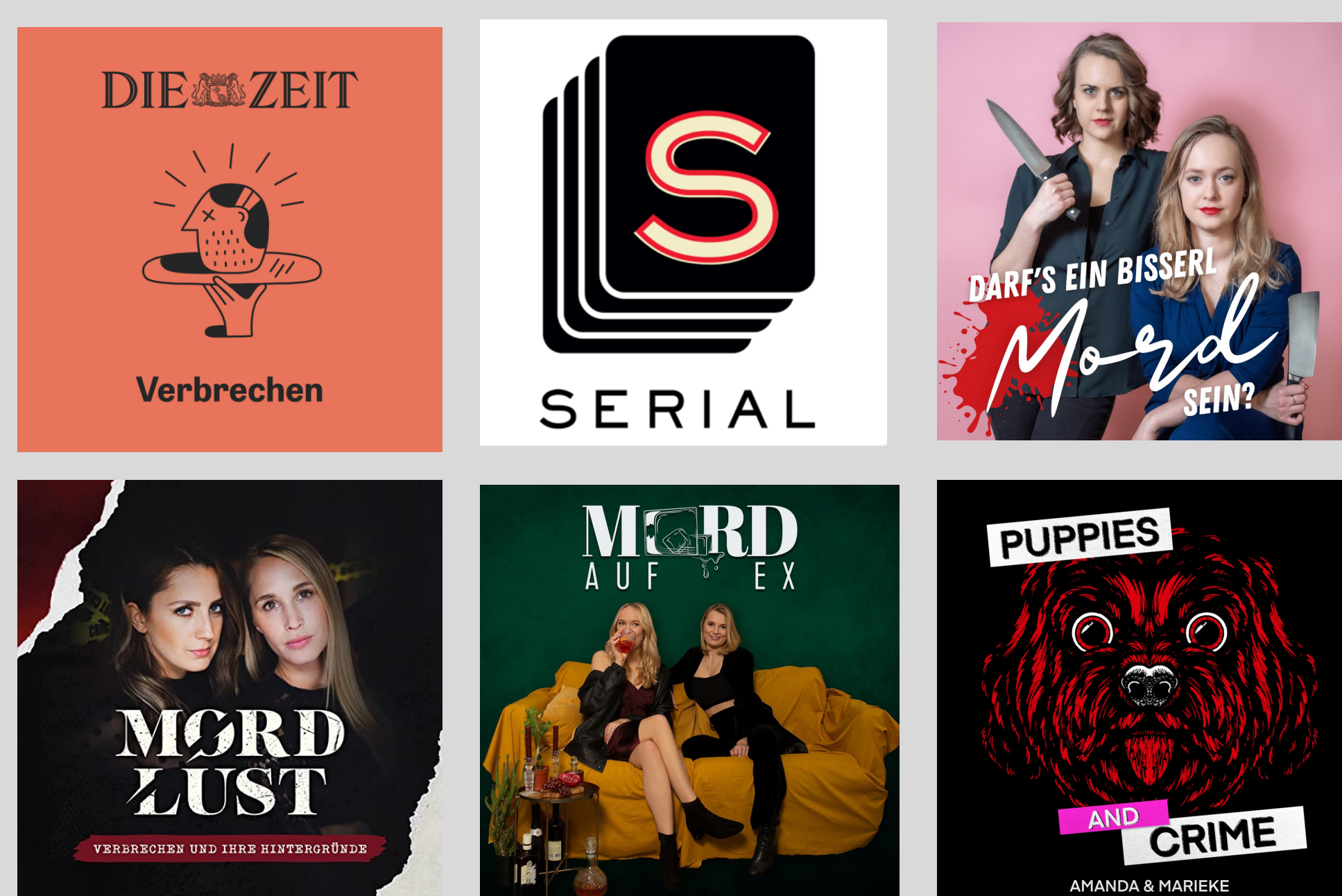
AUTHORS

Ramona Riehle, ramona.riehle@uibk.ac.at
Stephanie Kogler, stephanie.kogler@uibk.ac.at

universität innsbruck
Research Area EPoS
Economy, Politics & Society

INTRODUCTION

- In recent years one could witness a consumer hype around true crime podcasts (Sherrill 2020; The Nielsen Company 2021). The recent hype has been the result of the genre's transformation from a sensationalist "lowbrow form of popular art" (Hernandez 2019, 78) into a **critical and intellectually engaging media genre** (Buozis 2017; Hernandez 2019).
- Prior consumer research suggests that **consumers' fascination for death and violence** related consumption is not solely motivated by sensationalism, but has a broader societal relevance (Drummond & Krszjzaniek 2016; Stone & Sharpley 2008; Stone 2011; Podoshen et al. 2018).
- Prior consumer studies investigate **niche consumption offerings** such as dark metal performances (Podoshen et al. 2018; Podoshen, Venkatesh, & Jin 2014) or fairly **expensive and time consuming travels** to dark tourism sites (Drummond & Krszjzaniek 2016; Stone & Sharpley 2008; Stone 2011).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What constitutes consumers' fascination with (critical) true crime podcasts?

- What is the relevance of consumers' fascination with true crime podcasts in contemporary society?

FINDINGS

Humanizing the evil perpetrator

"Well, everyone has a picture of a criminal in one's head. A crazy murderer or bank robber and we all hope to be able to recognize these people at first sight. I **find it frightening that it [the criminal] can be the friendly neighbor next door as well as someone you see at Aldi.** And that's what I always find fascinating and frightening. " (Linda)

"**I think that you learn the warning signs. Yes, to recognize them.** Even in children, as I said, I work a lot with children and yes, to recognize something where you think to yourself, okay, another 20 years and we'll have the perfect murderer here [...] And yeah, recognizing those warning signs." (Linda)

Disenchanting the naive victim

"**[He] was a student who lived in a shared flat and that he did not commit any crime, he threatened someone, but he did not commit any crime.** He was someone with whom I could identify myself, because he was a young student living in a shared flat. " (Julia)

" [...] sometimes there are [...] victims, who have had no connection to the perpetrator. Where you then think to yourself, why was this innocent person victimized [...]. That is more what I think. A completely innocent [victim] **who was at the wrong time in the wrong place.** (Sophie)

Challenging the protective state and its institutions

"Yes, I remember two stories particularly well. One episode was about police violence in Germany, **because you often hear stories about the U.S., where the police do very bad things. But it [the episode] was about the fact that things are going wrong in Germany or Austria as well.** (Julia)

"I have already told my husband that if I should ever disappear or somehow not come home from work, then he should worry, because that is not typical for me. **Because I have already heard of cases where the police simply do nothing with adults, unlike with children, for ages, and I have already told him that the police here in our small village will not take care of it, but you will.**" (Fiona)

ENABLING LENS

- We draw on two notions from Katz (1993) that contribute to the demystification of evil.
- First, **evil is banal** (Arendt, 1964). It is not unique to pathologically monstrous people, but rooted in ordinary social behaviors. Second, **evil is not inherent to people but produced by contexts.**

METHOD

- 19 in-depth interviews with German speaking consumers
- 13 female and 6 male between 21 and 60 years
- Participants were recruited through True Crime Facebook groups and an Instagram story that was reposted by "Zeit Verbrechen"

CONTRIBUTION

- To **literature on the consumption of death and violence** (Drummond and Krszjzaniek 2016; Podoshen et al. 2018; Podoshen), by suggesting that true crime can be a means to confront and regain control over fears of being victimized.
- Literature on **precautionary consumption behaviors** (Barnhart et al. 2018; Campbell et al. 2019), by proposing that listening true crime teaches warning signs and defense strategies that makes consumers feel prepared.