Sociological Forum

SOCIOLOGICAL FORUM

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Timeless Kills: Media Looping and the Cultural Production of Serial Killer Icons

Brian Monahan

Department of Sociology, Baldwin Wallace University, Berea, Ohio, USA

Correspondence: Brian Monahan (bmonahan@bw.edu)

Received: 18 August 2025 | **Revised:** 24 September 2025 | **Accepted:** 4 October 2025

ABSTRACT

Constructionist theorists emphasize that meanings are socially created and disseminated through symbolic communication, with media holding a vital role in these processes. This study examines how meanings regarding the life and crimes of Jeffrey Dahmer, infamous American serial killer, have been repeatedly constructed and reconstructed in media since his crimes were discovered in 1991. Drawing on the concept of "looping," it analyzes how decades of mediated representations—in a diverse array of media technologies and formats, ranging from news and documentaries to social media and consumer merchandise—have reformatted public memory and meanings regarding Dahmer and his crimes. Findings highlight how technology shifts, media logic, and cultural narratives fuel recurring representations that can alternately reinforce or revise existing frames and meanings. Potential implications for constructionist inquiry are discussed.

1 | Introduction

Constructionist theorists who study social problems often cite the natural history models developed by Blumer (1971) and Spector and Kitsuse (1977) as being foundational to their research. These models suggest that issues become transformed into social problems by going through some number of stages through which they generate public recognition, policy discourse, and institutional responses. It is standard practice for constructionist scholars to apply specific cases to these models to better understand their contours and features. Studies using this approach have documented, among other things, how child abuse emerged as a societal concern (Pfohl 1977), how "drug scares" are typically created (Reinarman and Levine 1989), and how the pink ribbon came to be associated with breast cancer (King 2006). The case-study approach has clearly proven to be fruitful, shedding light on how meanings become attached to social issues, highlighting rhetorical elements that tend to yield effective problem claims, and identifying what occurs within the different stages of the social problems process (Best and Monahan 2025). Researchers have also explored how these processes contribute to the construction of meanings for events and individuals in addition to issues (c.f., Alimi and Maney 2018; Sheinheit and Bogard 2016).

Despite the many theoretical advances generated by case-study methodologies, some contemporary constructionist theorists have raised concerns about collective overreliance on this approach, suggesting that it threatens to stymie methodological innovation and theoretical expansion in this field. Joel Best (2018) has argued that constructionist scholars "need to move beyond case studies … to make more comparisons" (61) that can identify differences in constructed meanings "across time, as well as space" (63). Best (2018) further elaborates: "Most social problems have histories; they have been constructed and reconstructed again and again. But the specifics of these claims tend to shift, to reflect new cultural and structural arrangements" (63). Scholars have called for more studies that examine how the meanings that are attached to issues, events, and individuals might evolve over time or across cases (Best 2015; Adorjan and Kelly 2022; Best and Monahan 2022).

Media represent a promising area for inquiry centered on comparing constructions over time and across places. Constructionist

scholars have long focused on media as a key conduit in the production of meanings. It is understood that all forms of media are active sites of meaning-making (Henry Jenkins 2006; Murthy 2012; Setai et al. 2018). Moreover, the media industry has undergone considerable changes in recent decades in terms of its structure, technologies, and communication contexts. These changes in the media ecosystem offer opportunities for social constructionist research, particularly with respect to how mediated meanings emerge and change within and across media types over time. Indeed, Ibarra and Adorjan (2018) have suggested that constructionist inquiry would benefit from more studies comparing constructions in online spaces to those found in traditional offline forms of communication. Other scholars have also noted the importance of understanding how evolving communication technologies affect how meanings about social problems are created, disseminated, and interpreted in different cultural and structural contexts (Maratea 2008; Loseke 2015; Sanders et al. 2015; Platts 2019). The current study seeks to respond to this pair of related directives from constructionist scholars—to move beyond case studies and to assess how constructed meanings might vary across media types and over time—by examining how the life and crimes of Jeffrey Dahmer, a notorious American serial killer, have been constructed and reconstructed in different media since his crimes were first discovered in 1991.

Jeffrey Dahmer killed 17 men and boys between 1979 and 1991 and engaged in dismemberment, cannibalism, necrophilia, and other crimes with several of the victims. The horror and salaciousness of Dahmer's crimes fueled extensive press coverage, particularly in the months following his arrest in July 1991. Since that time, aspects of Dahmer's story have been told and retold in an array of news reports, documentaries, films, television programs, books, graphic novels, podcasts, and social media posts; additionally, the popular culture marketplace is rife with Dahmer-inspired toys, trading cards, costumes, household items, collectibles, and memorabilia connected with his childhood, his crimes, or his time in prison. Just within the last few years, Dahmer's story has been the subject of one of the most watched *Netflix* programs of all time (Hailu 2022), spawned numerous podcast episodes, inspired a steady stream of posts on YouTube and TikTok, fueled a robust collectibles market (Fathallah 2024), and inspired popular Halloween costumes worn by adults and children alike (Scottile 2022).

How is it that Dahmer retains a prominent place in both media and the broader culture today, particularly considering the abhorrent depravity of his crimes and the fact that his offending career ended nearly 35 years ago (and he died just a few years later when he was killed in prison by a fellow inmate)? The present study suggests that Dahmer's longevity as an enduring cultural figure reflects the complex interplay of technology, media routines, collective memory, and cultural forces that fetishize predatory criminal violence and position some extremely violent offenders as criminal icons. Exploring mediated representations of Dahmer in this way offers lessons regarding the evolution of constructions over time and across media technologies.

1.1 | Looping Dahmer

An essential duty of the media involves "selecting the most important people and events of the past and explaining their historical significance" (Kitch 1999, 121), thus enabling mass media to operate as "the shapers (and repository) of public memory" (122). The routines of media production tend to result in overwhelmingly homogenized content throughout the media industry (Nechushtai et al. 2024). Media generally favor familiar topics and produce content in ways that align with genre conventions, tropes, and other established cultural frameworks. The constant churn of representation and re-representation in mass media has consequences for the meanings that are attached to issues, events, and individuals and informs whether those meanings endure or change in collective memory over time.

Decades of varied and extensive media depictions of Jeffrey Dahmer have helped to build an intertextual collection of meanings that support the ongoing construction and reconstruction of his life and crimes. The concept of "looping" (Surette 2015) is used here to assess the effects of recurring representations of Dahmer over time and across different media technologies. Looping occurs "when events and information are repeatedly cycled and recycled through the media into the culture to re-emerge in new contexts" (Surette 2015, 5). Looping results not just in renewed attention; it alters meanings. Because each mediated retelling hews toward existing cultural narratives as well as the demands of media technology, genre, and format, meanings become reformatted with each retelling. This project examines how the continued "looping" of Dahmer in media and culture over the last 30 years has introduced reconstructed versions of Dahmer and whether reformatted representations have altered or altogether replaced the constructed meanings that preceded them. Findings underscore the role of media in the cultural production of meaning and show how continued looping of content through media and culture promotes emergent reconstructions that both draw from and distort collective memory.

1.2 | Culture, Media, and Collective Memory

Meanings carried in mass media contribute to the construction of collective realities and shape how individuals organize perceptions and process experiences. Of course, meanings are neither created nor circulated in a vacuum; they both inform and are informed by the broader cultural contexts in which they are developed, distributed, and received. Over time, meanings coalesce into a collection of details and interpretations that, through repeated retellings, give rise to a collective memory within cultural groups. Collective memory serves as a kind of repository of meanings—communicated through shared symbols and cultural narratives—about the past that members of a group use to make sense of their past, present, and anticipated future (Schwartz 1997). Like all constructed realities, collective memory is subject to reconstruction and reinterpretation; in the words of Olick and Robbins (1998), collective memory is "a process, not a thing" (122). The meanings that are created and ascribed to issues, events, and individuals are not static; they change over time in response to shifting moralities and political dynamics. Recent debates about statues, museum displays, and recognized holidays exemplify this susceptibility to change. Technology shifts can also alter the cultural contexts in which meanings are constructed and interpreted. Scholars who study the links between media and memory cite media as a vital influence over *what* and *how* we remember about our

past. Furthermore, they suggest that much of this power owes to their reach, diverse technologies and formats, and penchant for emotion-eliciting narrative storytelling (Kligler-Vilenchik et al. 2014).

1.3 | Media Logics, Violent Crime, and the Elevation of Serial Murder

Those who make media for mass audiences (e.g., journalists, television producers, advertising copywriters, and social media influencers) rely on a set of routines and rules to produce content that aligns with their priorities and allows them to navigate the various logistical challenges inherent to media production (such as budget constraints, time limitations, genre conventions, format requirements, and audience preferences). These rules and routines—referred to as "media logics"—inform the selection, organization, and distribution of content (Altheide and Snow 1979; Altheide 2013). Meanings that emerge and evolve through the media largely reflect the application of these rules and routines. The concept of media logic, then, captures the interplay of culture, power, context, individual actions, and symbolic communications in the production of meanings in media (Altheide 2006).

Most content producers in media are charged with making content on a recurring basis, so having a reliable set of procedures is important for doing that work. Individuals and organizations draw upon prevailing media logics to develop a sort of prioritized "checklist" of elements that they think will help them do their work efficiently and effectively. For instance, most people who create media are looking to make content that is entertaining in some way; with this, they prioritize things like drama, suspense, humor, or human interest tales that audiences typically find to be compelling (Harcup and O'Neill 2017). Some may assign greater value to content that offers novelty or shock value. Still, others might value content that can be spread out over time in a series of reports or segments.[1] Media logic is shaped in part by the technological demands of each medium; for example, the elements that are prioritized for producing social media content may be quite different than those favored in the production of traditional media (van Dijck and Poell 2013). A key point here is that, regardless of which elements of media logic are selected for attention and prioritized, the content that is created must be wrapped in bundles of meaning that are familiar to both producers and audiences. As Zelizer (2022) reminds us, the various routines, checklists, and typifications that are used to guide the production and dissemination of media content are "an act of memory … reminders of what they have done in the past" (5). Media routines and culture's collective memory are inexorably linked.

Crime offers a compelling example of the dynamic relationship between media logic and the production of meanings. Media are not merely transmitters of facts or objective windows into crime and social control; rather, media depictions of crime actively construct meanings about crime, criminals, and the criminal justice system (Ferrell 2013). Decades of consistent patterned representations of crime and justice in the media have contributed to the creation of cultural narratives about crime. These "crime stories" then become part of the media logic of crime coverage, helping to guide the selection, framing, and reception of crime content going forward (Sasson 1995; Wilson and Ibrahim 2010). For instance, it is generally accepted among news organizations that individual predatory violence (e.g., murder or assault) is more newsworthy than other types of crime; as a result, violent crime consistently draws more media attention than property crime, even though the latter occurs far more often (Weitzer and Kubrin 2004). Further, cultural crime narratives throughout history have constructed *dangerous places* and *dangerous others*—often minority groups and the places where they live—as blameworthy for crime or other social ills (Ruth Simpson 1996; Leverentz 2012); thus, it is perhaps unsurprising that studies show that entertainment media have long depicted minorities as perpetrators at a rate that far outpaces their share of criminal offending (Mastro and Robinson 2000). Similarly, many contemporary crime stories tout the unique dangers posed by unknown others, and these persistent "stranger danger" tales result in media coverage that is disproportionately focused on stranger-perpetrated crimes, even when offenses are more commonly carried out by assailants who know their victims (Beatty and Daniel Butler 2024).

Violent crime has been favored as a source of content for news and entertainment media for centuries (Flanders 2014), and its appeal remains heightened in the contemporary media landscape. Tales of crime and violence align favorably with the media logics and agendas of many news and entertainment organizations. Crime stories typically offer an abundance of suspense, drama, titillation, human interest, and other raw elements that can be fashioned into compelling news and entertainment programming. Crime content is effective for generating emotional responses (such as fear, empathy, or outrage), which is valuable for media organizations in their efforts to attract and retain audiences (Kort-Butler and Hartshorn 2011). This collective penchant for content centered on violence and depravity has proven to be quite adaptive to new media technologies as well. Popular streaming services offer an extensive library of programming centered on violent crime and social control. Crime-related content is also plentiful on popular video-sharing sites (e.g., YouTube) and social media applications (Jones 2023), while many of the most popular podcasts are directly focused on sensational crimes and criminal investigations (Sherrill 2020).

Serial murder represents one of the more commodified forms of violent crime (Jarvis 2007). Serial killers—generally understood as those who kill multiple victims at different locations, with a "cooling off" period between incidents[2]—have long held a special place in Western cultures, where they are commonly celebrated as "perverse icons" (Wiest 2016, 327). Decades of fascination with serial murder in media and culture have helped to render the serial killer as, perhaps, "the exemplary modern celebrity" (Schmid 2005, 4). Of course, media coverage of serial murder has long been wildly disproportionate to the actual frequency of such crimes (Philip Jenkins 1994; Marceaux et al. 2023). Nonetheless, relentless fetishization has elevated serial murder as a matter of public concern while also foregrounding individual offenders in the public consciousness.

In many cases, the exploits of real-life serial murderers draw attention in news and entertainment media even years after the killers' convictions or deaths. Indeed, several serial murderers

(e.g., Ted Bundy, John Wayne Gacy, and Jeffrey Dahmer) have emerged as what criminologist Ray Surette (2015) terms "criminal predator icons" through repeated retellings of their crimes in popular media. This is largely a product of routinized practices in media and popular culture. Cases involving serial homicide offer tremendous appeal for both media producers and consumers. They tap into the long-running, deep-seated public fascination with true crime, which is titillating because it allows us to actively engage with tales involving "criminals, grisly details, and subversive characters" (Sherrill 2020, 2) while also serving as "moral parables" (Gaynor 2024, 4) that allow us to favorably juxtapose our own positions in society's moral order relative to these offenders and their misdeeds. Serial killers today occupy an increasingly prominent place in the cultural landscape due to the massive growth in public interest in true crime content spurred by the expansion of digital media (Sherrill 2020; Rickard 2023). Jeffrey Dahmer is among those who have found renewed prominence through placement in digital media.

2 | Methodology

This study examines the evolution of meanings ascribed to the life and crimes of Jeffrey Dahmer in the media since his arrest in July 1991. Notably, the life cycle of Dahmer coverage has coincided with a period marked by massive transformations in how media content gets created, distributed, and consumed. Once-dominant media forms—such as print news—have seen both their influence and market share wane. At the same time, a vast collection of entirely new digital communication tools and formats has been introduced or become mass diffused during that time; these include personal computers, smartphones, the internet, social media, and other technologies. These changes in the media ecosystem offer opportunities for comparative constructionist research focused on how meanings might shift across media types over time, but they also pose challenges for gathering and analyzing data because of the massive scope of content available.

In total, seven different media types were selected for analysis (see Table 1). In addition to seeking a diversity of media technologies, the selection of media types was intended to reflect general trends in information production and consumption over the last 30 years. For instance, print news was the choice for assessing breaking news of the Dahmer case in 1991 because it was a dominant media form at that time. A pair of television interviews with Dahmer from 1993 and 1994 was included because television newsmagazines were immensely popular and influential in the early 1990s (Barkin 2003), and the broadcasts that included the Dahmer interviews drew considerable public interest at that time.[3] The continued accelerated growth of the popular culture industry from the 1980s to today guided the decision to include certain material artifacts (i.e., collectibles and memorabilia) as examples of representations of Dahmer in popular culture.[4] Similarly, the growing influence of digital media over the last 2 decades mandated that prominent forms of digital media be included as well.[5]

Decisions regarding sampling parameters, sample sizes, units of analysis, and analytical strategies varied slightly for each media type, guided by factors such as accessibility, comparability, and analytical feasibility. This is not intended to be a complete record nor a representative sampling of all of Dahmer's appearances in the press, popular culture, and digital media. The broad range of media being examined required, for practical reasons, limiting the scope of data for each of the different media forms. For print news, the decision was made to analyze headlines because they are easily accessible, are amenable to thematic analysis, and have been shown to play an important role in shaping meanings acquired through news consumption.[6] Headlines were drawn from a few targeted newspapers—the *New York Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*—and a general web image search for newspaper headlines about the case through August of 1991.[7] The televised prison interviews with Dahmer from 1993 and 1994 required a different approach, as headlines or even summaries would not be sufficient for that medium. For these, both transcripts and videos from each broadcast were collected and analyzed using techniques of qualitative document analysis. For popular culture, the decision was made to focus on Dahmer-related memorabilia and collectibles because these are distinctive from other media types being examined here and they can be accessed through general web searches as well as by visiting the websites of dedicated online retailers. For podcasts, a search for "Jeffrey Dahmer" in *Spotify*—a popular streaming platform for music and podcasts—produced dozens of relevant podcast episodes, and these were analyzed in a similar fashion as print news headlines (episode titles and thumbnail summaries substituted for headlines). Other forms of digital media analyzed here—a theatrical film, a *Netflix* streaming television series, and content from YouTube and

TABLE 1 | Summary of media types and data sources.

Media type	Data source	Dates for media content
Print News Headlines	Newspapers	July 23–August 31, 1991
	Internet image search	
Television Interviews	*Inside Edition*	February 1993 (air date)
	Dateline	November 1994 (air date)
Popular Culture Material Artifacts	Keyword searches in Google, Etsy (online retailer), and "Murderabilia" websites	1995–present
Theatrical Film	*My Friend Dahmer*	2017
Streaming Media Television Series	*Monster-Dahmer: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* (Netflix)	2022
Podcasts	Episode titles and summaries (Spotify)	2015–present
Social Media	YouTube and TikTok	2019–present

TikTok—were chosen because they represent distinctive and very popular media forms in contemporary culture.

The analytical framework applied to each media type represents a mixture of Bowen's (2009) techniques for qualitative document analysis and the "tracking discourse" approach put forth by Altheide and Schneider (2013). Each was prioritized because it can be flexibly applied to assess different types of media content. Document analysis, according to Bowen (2009, 32), "involves skimming (superficial examination), reading (thorough examination), and interpretation." The intent is not to provide fixed categories, quantitative counts, or other outcomes typical to qualitative mass media analysis; rather, the aim was to identify emerging themes in the data and consider their potential role in producing and contextualizing meanings. These strategies are paired in the present study with the "tracking discourse" approach (Altheide and Schneider 2013), which is designed in part to capture the connections between media logic and the productions of meaning through media. It is intended to help analysts better understand how technology, communication formats, and media logic guide the creation, distribution, reception, and interpretation of media content (Altheide and Schneider 2013). Applying techniques of both thematic document analysis and tracking discourse facilitates the identification of themes and frames in media depictions of Dahmer over time and across different media technologies. The combination yields an analytical framework that is coherent yet remains adaptable to different media forms and formats. In so doing, it helps to locate meanings in the temporal and communication contexts in which they were created, distributed, and received.[8]

3 | Analysis

Researchers have long shown that media are central to the social construction of meanings in everyday life (Gamson et al. 1992). Many media formats constitute a form of storytelling in that they align meanings with collective memory, package them within established narrative structures, and distribute them through familiar communication channels. In so doing, media tend to "merge the past, the present, and the future into a single, ongoing tale" (Kitch 1999, 122). Patterned applications of media logic as well as characteristics of storytellers and audiences can all affect the meanings that emerge from mediated storytelling. Several studies have illuminated the organizational and interactional contexts in which these processes unfold (c.f., Altheide 2013; Schudson 1989; Stromback et al. 2012).

The present study examines media representations of Jeffrey Dahmer across different media over more than 30 years. Findings show that Dahmer and his crimes are constructed differently over time, and this reflects evolving technologies, temporal shifts in culture, and other forces. Some portrayals vary only slightly from one another, while others offer starkly different framings that promote differential interpretations of Dahmer's criminal motives and deviant behavior. Over time, we see Dahmer transformed from a narrow portraiture of a "cannibal" and "monster" into a more nuanced character, alternately depicted as a lost soul, a loving son, a dutiful follower of his religious faith, and even a victim in his own right. Yet in other depictions, Dahmer is seemingly stripped of personhood entirely as he becomes little more than a product for sale or a caricature that fuels the spread of jokes, memes, and viral videos. These shifts are accomplished through an ongoing process of media reformatting and reframing—or "looping"—that occurs as content producers draw upon extant cultural crime narratives and incorporate the media logic appropriate to their selected media technologies, genres, formats, and moment in time. Each package of meanings that emerges serves to further the looping of Jeffrey Dahmer in media and popular culture over time.

3.1 | Meeting the "Milwaukee Cannibal": Press Coverage in the Summer of 1991

The first news report about the Dahmer case was issued by a local Milwaukee television news station early in the morning on July 23, 1991. This was mere hours after Dahmer's arrest, so little information was available. Nonetheless, the anchors seized upon the more salacious details that had emerged, such as the discovery of body parts, police statements suggesting multiple victims, and video showing footage of police and other response units working outside of the apartment that morning:

> Milwaukee police found body parts in a Northside apartment, and now they wonder if they have uncovered some kind of death factory ... Police found parts of bodies, leading them to believe that the man they arrested is a mass murderer ... a 31-year-old man was arrested at that apartment ... A police lieutenant tells us he suspects this case will get national attention and could be the most gruesome case we have seen in Milwaukee in years.
>
> FOX6 1991

Other local print and television news outlets joined the coverage later that day, and national media began reporting on the story soon thereafter. By the end of July, the Dahmer story had become a full-blown media frenzy.

The focus of this early coverage is consistent with common findings from research on media logic and the principles of selection that guide how news workers respond to "breaking" news. For example, incidents involving extreme violence and shocking details are much more likely to draw media attention (Monahan and Maratea 2013), while events with higher death tolls tend to draw greater coverage as well (Fox et al. 2021). Early reporting on violent incidents typically prioritizes the psychology of individual offenders as a framing device (Marceaux et al. 2023). When media and public interest persist beyond the initial "breaking" period—as was certainly the case in the Dahmer coverage—journalists seek new story angles to cover; one of the most common strategies is to try to access behind-the-scenes footage and details to bring audiences "inside" the story (Monahan 2010; Bock 2011). The first weeks of Dahmer coverage checked all these boxes: journalists readily seized upon the more sensational details of interpersonal violence and sexual depravity shared by investigators to construct news reports. Reports of "multiple victims" fueled a spate of speculative stories about just how high the victim count might be. The cavalcade

of grisly discoveries found inside Dahmer's apartment by investigators included Polaroid pictures of his victims in various stages of dismemberment, body parts stuffed into cardboard boxes, plastic bags, and dresser drawers, a barrel filled with acid and bones, and three human heads in a refrigerator. With this, journalists worked tirelessly to bring their audiences "inside" Dahmer's apartment by acquiring images or soliciting insider accounts from police officers or Dahmer's fellow tenants.

Analysis of news headlines about the Dahmer case throughout the summer of 1991 reveals two clear prevailing themes in that coverage: (1) a concerted focus on getting inside *Dahmer's mind* (i.e., dissecting the psychology of Dahmer) and (2) dogged attempts to get inside *Dahmer's crimes*, which involved trying to understand how he organized and carried out his behaviors (and, to a lesser extent, how he was able to avoid detection for so long). Examples of headlines reflective of a focus on Dahmer's motives include: "17 Killed, and a Life is Searched for Clues," "A Loner's Morbid Fascination," and "Clues to a Dark Nurturing Ground for One Serial Killer." Many headlines simply referred to Dahmer as "The Cannibal" or the "Milwaukee Cannibal," allowing the potency of that term to connote Dahmer's inherent monstrosity and the depravity of his crimes.

Reporters' attempts to provide as much behind-the-scenes detail as possible about Dahmer's crimes were evident in several headlines. A story published in the *Chicago Tribune* a day after Dahmer's arrest introduced readers to the grim scene being uncovered by investigators with a punny headline referring to Dahmer's apartment as a "Little Body Shop of Horrors." Other reports with similar aims used more sober headlines such as "Body Parts Litter Apartment," "A Grisly Anatomy of Crime," and "The Stench Was the Worst" (reflecting insider accounts from those who had entered the apartment). Reports about how Dahmer was able to escape detection during his prolonged killing spree were rare in the headlines sampled in this study, with one exception: *The New York Times* made this a core focus of its coverage of the case. *The New York Times* released 22 news reports about the case from July 24 through August 30, and 15 were about failures on the part of Milwaukee's police or other institutions.[9] It should be emphasized, however, that *The New York Times*'s coverage was an outlier in this regard.

As August turned to September in 1991, a clear pattern had emerged in the media coverage. While there was a tremendous amount of reporting on the Dahmer case through the summer of 1991, its focus was rather limited, with news producers primarily seeking to get inside the mind of Dahmer or provide audiences with shocking details about the crimes. As such, months of macabre headlines and gruesome press accounts gave rise to a narrow, caricaturized portrait of Dahmer as a psychologically deranged loner with a compulsion to kill, dubbed the "Milwaukee Cannibal."

3.2 | Getting to Know Jeffrey Dahmer: Television Newsmagazine Programs, 1993–94

In February 1992, Dahmer was sentenced to serve 15 consecutive life sentences in a Wisconsin prison. This marked a turning point in the media coverage. Absent the suspense, horror, and raw emotion provided by investigative reports and courtroom revelations, the press and public inevitably shifted their focus to other matters. But public interest would be rekindled several months later by two key media events: First, Jeffrey Dahmer agreed to sit for an on-camera interview with *Inside Edition*, a prominent tabloid television program of that era. That interview aired in February 1993. Second, Dahmer's father, Lionel Dahmer, published a memoir entitled *A Father's Story* early in 1994, leading to a second television interview of Dahmer; this one, granted to *NBC's Dateline* and aired in March 1994, featured Dahmer seated alongside his father for the duration of the interview.[10]

The pair of interviews not only returned Dahmer to the national spotlight, but they also contributed in important ways to the looping and reformatting of Dahmer. Each carried themes from the initial press coverage (e.g., the monstrosity of Dahmer's crimes and psychological motives were the focus of many questions), but the questions and production elements also positioned him as a human figure who was more than *just* the "Milwaukee Cannibal." This is partly a product of the medium. Television yields an inherent merging of information and moving imagery that not only informs the kind of content that is presented but also deeply affects the way that content is received by audiences. Televisual content induces different sensemaking demands and offers additional pathways for forging emotional connections between audience members and both the content and the person(s) delivering that content (Grabe 1999).

The *Inside Edition* broadcast featured extensive editorializing and sensationalized language, typically in banter between the program's anchor (a pre-*Fox News* Bill O'Reilly) and the interviewer, or in voice-overs leading into or out of commercial breaks. Viewers were told that Dahmer is "pure evil," a "modern-day monster" who committed "some of the most brutal crimes the world has ever seen"; they were also asked, rhetorically (while images of Dahmer as a baby, as a toddler smiling at the camera from his father's lap, and as a high school student appeared on the screen): "*How did a boy born into a hard-working, middle-class family turn into the worst kind of monster imaginable*?" With this question—which is seemingly intended to set up interview questions about Dahmer's path to becoming a cannibal serial killer—the program juxtaposes some of Dahmer's prekiller social statuses against that of the "monster" they had come to know; with this, Dahmer acquires a potential array of new meanings as viewers are asked to consider the fact that he was once something besides *just* the "Milwaukee Cannibal," thus contributing to a subtle reformatting of the public face of Dahmer.

Dateline undertook a much more overt approach to crafting for viewers a portrait of Dahmer as a person, with interview questions and production elements structured to spotlight his life and emotional experiences both before and after his long period of criminal offending. This owes in part to the fact that the interview was intended to explore the perspectives and experiences of Jeffrey's father, Lionel Dahmer. The broadcast begins with Dahmer walking in view of the camera and immediately going to his father as the two men share a warm embrace—with audio but no editorializing voice-overs. This is followed by the interviewer (Stone Philips) coming into view of the camera to greet

Dahmer with "Hi, Jeff, nice to see you" and a proffered handshake; Dahmer responds with a "Hi, Mr. Philips" as the two shake hands before moving into commentary about the recent winter weather in Wisconsin (Dahmer: "You're lucky you came up on a day with no snow, it's been snowing like crazy all weekend."). The banality of this exchange reflects the tone of much of the interview, which was convivial throughout. Note, also, the use of "Jeff" by the interviewer in his greeting, which conveys a greater sense of interactional warmth and equity than using a full name or a last name only.[11]

On *Dateline*, questions are posed in a way that creates rhetorical distinctions between Dahmer's well-publicized deviant identities—sadist, cannibal, serial killer—and his more conventional identities, as Dahmer is invited to talk about his relationship with his father, his newfound religious faith, his childhood, and other life experiences. When Dahmer is asked to discuss the murders and other crimes, it is with vague terms such as "your crimes" or "going down that road," while Dahmer's invocations of his misdeeds are further sanitized with phrasings such as "the things I did." Largely, the interview is framed as a tale of father-son reconciliation as the two sit side by side and many questions are asked of each of them about their relationship. Toward the close of the interview, the two men say "I love you" to one another and hug, after which the camera zooms in to show Lionel lovingly rubbing his son's forearm before saying, "this interview has brought us to ... a little bit closer understanding. I feel very close to Jeff, and it's going to continue until our deaths. And I feel good about it."

Through the televisual technology and formatting of the television newsmagazine model, audiences can see Dahmer acquire humanizing dimensions that mark him as more than merely the one-dimensional monster constructed in the initial press coverage. The production elements used by *Dateline* fueled a significant reformatting of Dahmer: While that program certainly probed the monstrosity of Dahmer's crimes, the interview questions and deliberate father-son framing introduced a multitude of additional social identities and asked viewers to consider them alongside—and, perhaps, instead of—the "monster" identity.

3.3 | Dahmer as Popular Culture Artifact

Dahmer was murdered in prison by a fellow inmate on November 28, 1994. The murder generated a burst of press coverage, but it also effectively closed off several potential narrative pathways for reexamining Dahmer over time. By mid-1995, Dahmer's story had largely receded from the press. Yet Dahmer-inspired media continued to be created. Various popular culture websites, databases, and user-created wikis have cataloged a great deal of the Dahmer media created since the mid-1990s[12]; that output has included a handful of films, as well as some documentaries, television dramas, true crime books, comic books, graphic novels, and even heavy metal albums. Many of these had minimal cultural impacts—as measured by traditional metrics such as box office figures or unit sales—but they each offered opportunities to reinforce or revise the meanings attached to Dahmer. The majority carried themes from the initial press coverage, in that they sought to get "inside the mind of a killer" or uncover how Dahmer managed to live a "secret life" and escape detection for so long. A few of these portrayals—typified by the film *Raising Jeffrey Dahmer* (2006) and the book *My Friend Dahmer* (2012)—echoed core framings from the 1994 *Dateline* interview by exploring the recollections of family, friends, and neighbors about their relationships with Jeffrey Dahmer. Although they did not introduce distinctive new themes into the coverage of Dahmer, they did contribute to the looping of Dahmer by spotlighting Dahmer and his crimes and by reformatting him according to the media logic and technological conventions of each medium.

By the early 2000s, the internet was becoming more widely diffused in society, and Dahmer found new cultural life in online spaces and in new forms beyond traditional media, with Dahmer-related content and artifacts circulating on eBay, Etsy, and websites dedicated to true crime memorabilia. Dubbed the "murderabilia" industry (Jarvis 2007), the serial killer-related content in these spaces represents the nexus of the constructed realities of crime, cultural narratives, media logics, and, of course, consumer culture.

> Murderabilia ranges from serial killer art (paintings, drawings, sculpture, letters, poetry), to body parts (a lock of hair or nail clippings), from crime scene materials to kitsch merchandising that includes serial killer T-Shirts, calendars, trading cards, board games, Halloween masks and even action figures of 'superstars' like Ted Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmer and John Wayne Gacy.
>
> Jarvis 2007, 327

Websites for this content abound. *Supernaught: True Crime Collectibles* offers dozens of Dahmer-centric items, to include photographs, physical newspapers, signed letters, and passes issued to Dahmer to visit the prison chaplain or library. At the time of this writing, *True Crime Collective* was offering Dahmer's high school band trumpet for sale. *Cult Collectibles* offers photographs—billed as previously unseen—of the interior and exterior of Dahmer's apartment building and artwork of Dahmer. *Serial Killer Central* offers items made by serial killers themselves (Schmid 2004).

Etsy, an online marketplace for handmade goods that was launched in 2005, offers a good example of the breadth and accessibility of Dahmer-related items in the murderabilia marketplace today. A recent search for "Jeffrey Dahmer" on Etsy returned a wide array of items, including several of the kind found on cult collectible sites (newspaper articles and books, mugshots, letters, and so on). The site also offers a wide array of user-made products in the form of clothing, coffee mugs, candles, and other items—many featuring Dahmer's likeness and witty slogans (e.g., candles labeled, "Sorry About the Smell"). Leaning into Dahmer's cannibal identity, several different kitchen cutting boards were available for sale, each emblazoned with Dahmer's image (with an apron added) and featuring phrasings such as "You look good enough to eat," "Start eating at home more," and "When the food runs out ... we'll still have each other."

The various joke-laden keychains, coffee mugs, and other tchotchkes emblazoned with Dahmer's image constitute

"looping" in the sense that their subject enters the culture through one form of media only to reemerge with newly acquired meanings as they are reformatted in accordance with the logics of a new form of media (e.g., a coffee mug) and new technologies (a direct-to-consumer online marketplace). While interest in Dahmer is largely fueled by the infamy of his crimes, his being appropriated into saleable cultural objects involves parodying and recycling selected elements of his crimes in a way that renders those crimes—and, by extension, Dahmer himself—humorous. In becoming a cultural object, the individual can be stripped of their personhood and become a saleable commodity above all else.

3.4 | Reformatting Dahmer for the Digital Media Age

In the second half of the 2010s, new representations in mainstream popular culture brought Dahmer to a broader and younger generation of media consumers, many of whom were born well after Dahmer's crimes were discovered in 1991.[13] The remainder of this section examines a varied collection of the different types of digital media that have contributed to the looping of the life and crimes of Jeffrey Dahmer over the past decade.

3.4.1 | My Friend Dahmer

A key entry in the return of Dahmer to mainstream popular culture arrived in 2017, when the film *My Friend Dahmer* was released. The film's contribution to the looping of Dahmer is notable for two reasons. First, it stars Ross Lynch—a widely popular teen idol at that time who was famous for his starring roles on *Disney Channel* programming—as Jeffrey Dahmer; this was a central focus of much of the marketing of the film, so younger audiences became acutely aware of the film and its subject matter. Second, the film introduced a more nuanced framing of Dahmer than previous mainstream media portrayals had offered. Like the graphic novel on which it is based (Backderf 2012), the focus is mainly on Dahmer's adolescence, making it more of a relatable coming-of-age tale than the "making of a monster" narratives found in other media about Dahmer's life prior to his first murder. Moreover, blame for Dahmer becoming a cannibal "monster" is decentralized, with responsibility assigned to the failings of the adults in his life—parents, school officials, police—and the apathy of his peers (as well as to Dahmer himself). In contrast to the one-dimensional portrait of Dahmer as the "Milwaukee Cannibal" that was the overwhelming focus of the press coverage in 1991 and prominent in many depictions thereafter, the framings in *My Friend Dahmer* "subverted the pre-existing narrative of Dahmer's innate monstrosity by claiming instead that the younger Dahmer who existed before the murderer emerged could be viewed as a tragic and ultimately sympathetic figure" (Presswood 2019, 219). While *My Friend Dahmer* introduced new framings of Dahmer and foregrounded his life and crimes in mainstream popular culture in a way that had not been seen for more than 20 years, it was the explosive growth of the true crime podcast industry that would bring Dahmer to new and wider audiences.

3.4.2 | Podcasts

Today, 55% of Americans aged 12 or older consume podcasts each month (Edison Research 2025). True crime is a very popular genre within the podcast ecosystem—this owes not only to the general cultural appeal of crime content but also to the podcast format, which "makes use of storytelling techniques that create compelling content and generates a community around the podcast" (Gaynor 2024, 3). It is estimated that more than 19 million Americans 18 and older listen to at least one true crime podcast in a typical week (Edison Research 2024b). Among those who consume true crime content in podcasts or other forms of media, 60% say they are interested in content about serial killers (Edison Research 2024a).

Reflective of these trends, I found dozens of podcasts dedicated to Dahmer (amid the hundreds documenting other serial killers and mass murderers). Many were single episodes within a themed series about serial killers, infamous murders, or criminal investigations, but several featured multiple episodes focused exclusively on Dahmer. Ten podcast series available on *Spotify* that included at least one episode about Dahmer were selected for analysis. Six of the ten included multiple Dahmer-focused episodes, resulting in a total of 24 episodes in the sample. Episode titles and thumbnail summaries were examined for each episode, and audio for some episodes was reviewed to add additional context or to clarify ambiguous titles or summaries. All episodes were coded for thematic focus, and every episode exhibited at least one of two primary themes: (1) untangling Dahmer's criminal motives and (2) providing detailed accounts of Dahmer's criminal acts, to include strategies that he used to avoid detection for so long. These two core focal areas represent a callback of sorts to patterned themes found in news reports from the summer of 1991, which also exhibited a distinctive emphasis on getting inside Dahmer's mind and taking audiences inside Dahmer's crimes. Thirty-eight percent of the examined episodes ($n = 9$) were focused primarily on Dahmer's criminal motives, and all offered a heavily psychologized framing: seven of these presented his psychological breakdown as a product of his troubled childhood, while two others suggested that he spiraled following his first kill in 1979, after which he was said to have quickly developed "an urge to kill." The heavily psychologized framings are evident in some of the titles of episodes ("Inside the MORBID Mind of Cannibal Jeffrey Dahmer" and "Lust Killer: Jeffrey Dahmer") and the names of the podcast series ("Murderous Minds," "Mind of a Monster," and "Killer Minds: Insider the Minds of Serial Killers and Murderers"). In these podcast episodes, Dahmer is constructed largely as a one-dimensional monster, as seen in the description from the "Lust Killer" episode of the *Serial Killers* podcast series, which described Dahmer as "a man consumed by violent desire ... Driven by arousal, obsession, and control, he found pleasure not just in death, but in what came after."

Eleven (46%) of the examined podcast episodes focused extensively on providing details about Dahmer's criminal acts.[14] These episodes were characterized by extremely graphic accounts of how Dahmer identified and seduced young men and murdered his victims—or tried to keep them alive in a zombie-like state for prolonged access to their bodies—as well as by the strategies or lucky breaks that allowed him to go undetected for

so long. Episodes that focused more on his criminal acts than his motives also reveal how the technological dimensions and media logics of podcasts introduce new production elements that alter how meanings are packaged, shared, and, potentially, interpreted. Many true crime podcasts feature an immersive storytelling structure, inviting listeners to "join" the investigation. This detective-like engagement is further buttressed by the ability of podcast hosts to introduce much more graphic content than could press outlets. Previously unseen crime scene photographs, evidence from trials, and conversations between killers and family members or investigators are shared. Many incorporate sound effects—suspenseful music, doors opening or closing, and even the sound of a handsaw cutting through bones—when describing Dahmer's actions to further craft the desired sense of immersive realism. Another common technique is to incorporate audio recordings of Dahmer acquired from investigator interviews or other sources (e.g., the prison interviews analyzed previously or phone calls between Dahmer and those outside the facility) along with reenacted communications when audio is not available (e.g., voice actors reading Dahmer's letters). Hearing Dahmer's voice and words—or a reasonable facsimile—decades after his death adds a humanizing dimension to the content and furthers the desired sense of immersive realism.

Podcasts are unique in how audiences engage with them, and this too can affect the meanings taken from that content. People typically listen to podcasts on demand, at a time of their choosing, in private (e.g., via headphones), and often while engaged in mundane daily tasks (e.g., cleaning or exercising). Thus, even a case as exceptionally violent and depraved as that of Dahmer becomes "a personal and intimate narrative, as the mobility of the podcast allows the story to accompany the listener in their daily life via the practice of private listening" (Gaynor 2024, 4). With this, podcast listeners come to engage with Dahmer as a kind of "living" character who is worthy of not only continued investigation but also emotional investment and recurring engagement (via additional listening or talking about the case with others).[15] The intimate manner in which many users engage with podcasts can imbue even an excessively violent offender such as Dahmer with a multidimensional quality not easily achieved in other media. That interpretive opportunity, coupled with the large and growing collection of Dahmer-focused content in podcasts and other true crime media, facilitates additional looping of Dahmer in ways that promote his humanity while also perversely celebrating his predatory violence.

3.4.3 | Netflix's Dahmer—Monster

Podcasts and *My Friend Dahmer* may have reintroduced Dahmer to a wider and more diverse public audience, but the fall 2022 release of Netflix's *Dahmer—Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* catapulted the life and crimes of Jeffrey Dahmer into a place of prominence within popular culture once again. *Dahmer—Monster* was just the third program to accumulate more than one billion hours of viewing in its first 60 days on Netflix (Hailu 2022). The structure of this show (a 10-episode scripted television series) brought a different format and distinctive media logics relative to other media forms examined to this point. The number of episodes, along with the length of each episode (usually 45–60 min), allowed its creators to include multiple themes and narrative framings. Some of these are quite like those featured in other media depictions: For instance, there is considerable focus on Dahmer as a "monster," and his murderous compulsions and degrading violence against others are often depicted in graphic detail. There are also attempts to humanize Dahmer—similar to the 1994 *Dateline* interview—by contextualizing him within his childhood and family life. Like *My Friend Dahmer*, a key element in *Dahmer-Monster*'s narrative was to point to the failures of the adults around Dahmer—parents, teachers, police—to explain how his compulsions took root and grew unchecked, thus allowing him to morph from a troubled teen into a cannibal and "monster." In this framing, Dahmer is a victim of a faulty system.

The representation of the life and crimes of Jeffrey Dahmer that emerges from *Dahmer-Monster* is not particularly distinct from those that came before it in terms of core frames and themes employed. But it is noteworthy for introducing Dahmer—both the person and the fictionalized character from the program—to a broader audience and cementing Dahmer as an enduring, iconic figure in the broader digital media landscape. One measure of Dahmer's renewed iconography following the commercial success of *Dahmer—Monster* can be found in the popularity of Dahmer paraphernalia on online retail sites. There was such a clamor for Dahmer-inspired Halloween costumes that eBay and other retailers temporarily banned sales of items commonly used to build those costumes (e.g., aviator-style sunglasses, blond wigs, and orange prison suits) (Cerullo 2022).

3.4.4 | After *Dahmer—Monster*: TikTok and YouTube

Another measure of the impact of *Dahmer—Monster* on the broader cultural landscape is found in the massive array of user-generated content that it spawned on social media sites such as YouTube and TikTok.[16] One notable observation from a review of content on YouTube is the availability of quite a bit of old media content related to Dahmer that exists alongside the abundance of user-generated content. Archival content found on YouTube includes local and national television news reports, courtroom appearances, discussions with victims' families, and both edited and unedited versions of the *Inside Edition* and *Dateline* interviews discussed earlier.[17] One new element that YouTube adds to the media logics of Dahmer content is the capacity to engage in dialogue with others while viewing. While the comments under the videos are too extensive and diverse to analyze in full here, it is notable that a sizeable number of them involve users commenting about the interviews through the lens of having watched Netflix's *Dahmer—Monster*. Many users took to these forums to celebrate the acting skill of Evan Peters, the actor who portrayed Dahmer ("Evan Peters who played him on the Netflix series has absolutely nailed his voice tone and accent. One of the best performances I've ever seen"), and others from the show ("Evan Peters, Niecy Nash, and Richard Jenkins ALL deserve every possible award available to actors for their portrayals! Absolutely amazing!"). For these users, the Dahmer that audiences may have come to know when these interviews aired in the early 1990s is not relevant to their interpretation. For them, Dahmer has been introduced in a new media context and thus is (re)interpreted in accordance with the conventions of

that media context as well as the needs and media engagement practices of those users. Here, we see that Dahmer, in being rendered as source material for a compelling television program, has been "looped" once again.

Pilati et al. (2025) suggest that the media logic of TikTok is akin to a traditional broadcasting model, where content creators are vying for attention in a competitive marketplace. With this, users aim to create content that is likely to appeal to the platform's algorithmic preferences. In a study of how Dahmer was received and reinterpreted on TikTok following the *Dahmer-Monster* series, Hall (2025) found that many Dahmer-related videos fit in one of three categories: (1) informational, (2) dark humor, and (3) those that sexualized or romanticized Dahmer. Videos in the informational category feature themes and frames in line with those identified in the earlier analysis of press coverage and podcasts—that is, they focus on gruesome details from the case, elements of the investigation, or questions about what made Dahmer the way he was. However, even these familiar themes and frames took on new dimensions when looped through the format and conventions of TikTok, which encourages users to engage in creative interpretation. A particularly vivid example recounted by Hall (2025) involves a TikTok user who was not content to merely recount Dahmer's criminal activities; they took the liberty of enacting a scenario for how they might stop a hypothetical Dahmer-like encounter in the future:

> Two individuals act out the scenario Dahmer used on many of his victims—drugging and attempting to engage with them. One man was dressed as Dahmer and the other … individual acting as one of the victims. They recreate Dahmer drugging the victim, and the video cuts to the victim choosing through his Minecraft inventory—a gallon of milk and punching gloves … The victim drinks the milk and punches Dahmer, causing Dahmer to fall. Dahmer then offers the victim a "pork sandwich," and the victim eats it. The victim feels uneasy, and Dahmer admits that it was the victim's genitals. This video received over 10.6 million views.
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> 11

TikTok videos representing dark humor, as described by Hall (2025), convey elements that mirror those observed in the various humor-laden trinkets available through Etsy or other online retailers; like those, the videos position Dahmer as a social object, a vehicle for humor first and foremost. The third category identified by Hall (2025) has traces of what was discussed about archival video content on YouTube, in the sense that many of the sampled videos placed in this category involve Dahmer content being viewed through the lens of *Dahmer-Monster*, particularly the performances of the main actors in the series. Many videos involve efforts to sexualize Peters's performance in the Dahmer series and, thereby, potentially extend sexualized qualities to Dahmer as well. Other videos in this category were identified as trying to make Dahmer appear normal and deserving of sympathy, with users dressing as Dahmer to engage in ordinary daily tasks. User-generated content that is intended to humorize or normalize Dahmer represents a unique aspect of looping: Because users are invited to reinterpret and repurpose content, they are afforded license to creatively depict selected aspects of Dahmer's story; in so doing, they often subvert established meaning structures in favor of redesigned frameworks of meaning that background some features of Dahmer's crimes and character while prioritizing others.

4 | Discussion

This study has explored the looping of Jeffrey Dahmer through decades of extensive and varied media representations. Looping is a process through which "events and information are repeatedly cycled and recycled through the media into the culture to reemerge in new contexts" (Surette 2015, 5). Applying this processual framework to media coverage of Dahmer has illuminated the dynamic interplay between media practices, cultural memory, and the social construction of meaning. Assessing the recurring representations of Dahmer's life and crimes in this way underscores not only the role of media in shaping public memory but also the symbolic resources and contested processes that characterize how meanings are constructed and negotiated in media.

Beginning with the well-established premise that all media are active sites of meaning-making, this project foregrounds media logics as key drivers in the production of meaning while also locating these processes within core cultural contexts, such as shared narratives and collective memory. Findings show that Dahmer and his crimes are constructed differently over time, often in accordance with the technological restraints and media logics of each media type. The "monster" framing was evident in all examined media portrayals, but to varying degrees. It was a defining feature in the breaking news coverage in 1991, and some later media, such as podcasts and certain episodes of Netflix's *Dahmer—Monster* series, amplified this framing by providing even more graphic depictions of Dahmer's criminal acts and framing them as evidence of his insatiable urge to kill. Other portrayals attempt to create a distinction between Dahmer's actions and his character; in these, the monstrosity of his crimes is acknowledged (and often still depicted in gruesome detail) but contextualized alongside other attributes assigned to Dahmer. This allows for themes and frames focused on Dahmer as a lost soul (as seen in media that focus on childhood trauma as the source of Dahmer's evildoing), a loving son (most prominently in the *Dateline* interview), and even as a victim in his own right (this theme emerged at various points in *My Friend Dahmer* and the *Dateline* interview, as well as in some episodes of *Dahmer—Monster* and several podcasts). For others, Dahmer's life and crimes were used to examine some larger societal problems, such as *The New York Times*'s coverage using the Dahmer case to advance a "faulty system" framing. Many media formats—most notably those found on TikTok and YouTube as well as in popular culture collectibles and memorabilia—transform Dahmer into an object of morbid curiosity, rendering him as little more than a product for sale or fodder for memes, jokes, and viral videos. The varied themes and framings—each fused with the media logics and interpretive contexts distinctive to each type of media—promote differential constructions and interpretations of Dahmer's crimes, character, and position in the collective moral order. Each package of meanings that emerges

serves to further the looping of Jeffrey Dahmer in media and popular culture over time.

The case of Jeffrey Dahmer underscores how culture, collective memory, technology, and media logic—along with the interpretive work of content producers and audiences—intersect to fuel the ongoing (re)construction and (re)distribution of meanings about individuals, events, and issues. Each mediated representation of Dahmer contributes to and draws from a broad collection of meanings not only about Dahmer but about serial killers, crime, media, social control, and other aspects of social life. Seeing how Dahmer has been repeatedly looped through recurring placement in media and culture has implications for how we think about collective memory. As noted previously, it is a reminder that collective memory should be understood as "a process, not a thing" (Olick and Robbins 1998, 122) and that the process is guided by symbolic communications as well as cultural objects that serve as signifiers of the meanings that emerge from those communications. From this perspective, then, looping does not simply revisit information or events from the past; it redacts and revises meanings as it reconstructs content. With respect to Dahmer, we see how meanings are altered or cast aside as he is looped through different media technologies and cultural contexts.

This, of course, reinforces the importance of framing. Research on framing suggests that initial frames in news media often have a lasting and somewhat deterministic effect on later media coverage and public discussions (Monahan 2010; Hubner 2021). This is true in some respects in the case of Dahmer, particularly in the endurance of the "monster" frames that originated in the initial coverage. However, this study, by analyzing representations of Dahmer across many different media types over more than three decades, suggests that even entrenched frames are malleable; they are subject to reinterpretation, revision, and, in some instances, replacement. As this study has shown, some depictions—particularly in press accounts of the early 1990s and in podcasts today—largely construct a narrow depiction of Dahmer as a cannibal monster. On the other hand, several alternative framings have been introduced that present Dahmer as a misunderstood outsider, as a victim of neglect and trauma, as fodder for humor (e.g., jokes and memes), and even as a romantic figure of sorts. Each representation results in reformatting, thus creating a cycle of ongoing reinterpretations of Dahmer's life, motives, and actions. Some depictions may dilute the moral clarity embedded in one-dimensional "monster" depictions and introduce opportunities to interpret the life and crimes of Jeffrey Dahmer through a lens of empathy or ambivalence. These alternative framings and differential interpretations reflect important changes in media over time—not only with respect to technologies but also formats, genres, and engagement practices—as well as broader cultural shifts, as seen in the evolution of attitudes regarding mental health, sexuality, victimization, and social control. This offers a reminder that meanings change not only because of shifts in mechanisms of meaning production but also due to changes to the cultural context in which meanings are received and interpreted.

Findings from this study offer lessons that extend beyond the matter of Dahmer or serial murder. I want to highlight three that may offer fruitful areas for future research. The first relates to social constructionism. Constructionists seek to understand the social processes through which meanings are created, and how these meanings in turn help to build and affirm collective realities. Media are often central to these processes. Meanings are in large part a reflection of the structural and cultural conditions involved in their production, distribution, and reception. As this study has shown, comparing meanings across media types illuminates some of the ways that media-specific structural factors (e.g., technological constraints, distribution pathways, and broad market forces), cultural contexts (e.g., media logics), and interactional processes (e.g., the one-way information flow common to traditional media versus the dynamics of user-generated content in social media) intersect with one another to shape the meanings that emerge from media. A logical extension of the present study might involve a research design centered on global media comparisons[18]; further, incorporating the concept of looping into such a study would offer an opportunity to examine how meanings are created and circulate within and through both media and diverse cultural contexts. This study also added a temporal dimension to such comparisons, and that, too, offers potential new avenues for inquiry, such as examining how and why meanings shift or remain stable over time or, when meanings do shift, whether those shifts are linear or recursive. As Monahan and Best (2023) note, time is deeply embedded in social problems claimsmaking and other meaning-making enterprises; constructionist inquiry would benefit from more studies that incorporate time within their processual frameworks (c.f., Adorjan and Kelly 2022).

A second consideration for future research extends from the findings regarding the role of social media within the looping process. Audiences in the age of social media ("users" in the parlance of the form) are no longer passive recipients of content; they are now central to the creation and distribution of content—and, by extension, meanings. This shift has been underway for some time (Henry Jenkins 2006), but many of today's most popular social media (e.g., TikTok, Instagram, YouTube) are built upon this premise. This makes audiences key participants in the looping process. When they take content from some other cultural sphere into these mediated spaces and then share, interpret, remix, or repurpose it (e.g., as jokes or memes), they are fundamentally altering the meanings initially carried in that content. With this, we can see that reaction videos, creative interpretations, and memes are more than just content for these sites: They represent the merging of participatory culture and media-driven looping of symbolic realities. Constructionists and symbolic interactions should consider more fully the ways that social media and its participatory culture shape how meanings about issues, individuals, and events are created and disseminated through that medium.

A third area of potential inquiry involves connecting media looping with crime rhetoric and social control practices. When considered in relation to crime and criminal offenders, we can see that looping does more than just produce or alter meanings; it reinforces moral order and legitimates social control practices. Violent crime has long served as a political tool (Garland 2001), and its potency in this regard extends in part from media logics that heavily prioritize interpersonal violence. Patterned media representations of violent crime operate alongside crime discourse to undergird crime policies. There is a playbook of sorts

for how this works: Media workers and public officials draw attention to a high-profile incident such as a mass shooting, a murder, or other forms of interpersonal violence that can be framed as victimizing *idealized innocents*. Although spotlighted incidents are usually quite rare, the coverage and rhetoric mark them as typical examples of some alleged problem, such as crime, immigration, urban dangers, and so on. This, in turn, creates a rhetorical foundation for espousing the need for "get tough" policies characterized by more aggressive and far-reaching social control strategies.

Serial killers, although statistically quite rare, can be a powerful symbolic resource for those seeking to use the dangers of extreme predatory violence as a pretext for hyper-punitive social control practices. Decades of prominent and recurring placement in media and popular culture have created the widespread public perception that serial murder is a common problem, with serial killers routinely depicted as "uniquely dangerous predatory villains, against whom no countermeasures [are] too extreme" (Philip Jenkins 2002, 1–2). It has been noted throughout this study that serial killers have acquired an iconic status in media and the broader culture; this is of course a nod to their perverse celebration in cultural processes and products, but it also acknowledges their role as symbolic reinforcers of dominant values and shared morality (Philip Jenkins 1994). Serial killers are modern-day "cultural bogeymen" (Philip L. Simpson 2000).

The symbolic value of serial killers in political discourse was evident during the campaign leading up to the 2024 US presidential election, as Donald Trump frequently referenced Hannibal Lecter when making claims about immigrants. Hannibal Lecter is of course the fictional cannibalistic serial killer made famous in the 1991 film, *The Silence of the Lambs*.[19] Most of Trump's invocations of Lecter were in claims about the alleged dangers associated with immigration, such as these remarks at a May 2024 rally in New Jersey:

> Has anyone ever seen *The Silence of the Lambs*? The late, great Hannibal Lecter is a wonderful man. He oftentimes would have a friend for dinner. Remember the last scene? "Excuse me, I'm about to have a friend for dinner," as this poor doctor walked by. I'm about to have a friend for dinner. But Hannibal Lecter. Congratulations. The late, great Hannibal Lecter. We have people who are being released into our country that we don't want in our country, and they're coming in totally unchecked, totally unvetted. And we can't let this happen. They're destroying our country, and we're sitting back.
>
> Suter 2024

The implication is that those who enter the country illegally are, like Lecter, psychopaths who cannot be deterred from their propensity toward extreme criminal violence. Trump mentioned Lecter frequently—a *Washington Post* analysis of 70 speeches delivered between November 2022 and August 2024 found mention of Lecter (or *The Silence of the Lambs*) in 20 of them—and even seemed to suggest that Lecter was a real-life offender, referring to him as "the late, great Hannibal Lecter" in multiple speeches (LeVine and Morse 2024).[20] Here we see not only the political value of extreme examples of violent crime (even those drawn almost entirely from works of fiction) but also the subtle potency of looping. In these speeches, Trump invoked a widely known film villain in a way that tapped into media and public fascination with real-life serial killers to construct an alleged threat that rhetorically positions draconian nationalist policies as vital to public safety.

Similar processes were evident in the looping of Dahmer through media and popular culture. The "monster" framings initially applied to Dahmer constructed a narrow, rigid set of meanings about Dahmer and his crimes. But they also conveyed meanings that were applicable to broader issues of crime and social control. For instance, applying "monster" framings to Dahmer or other violent offenders helps to perpetuate the falsehood that serial murder and other forms of violent crime should be understood as what happens when we permit broken, deranged individuals (i.e., "monsters") to live among us, while at the same time directing attention away from the cultural and structural correlates of criminality. This, in turn, provides supportive contexts for endless "war on crime" rhetoric and prioritizes aggressive social control, punitive adjudicative strategies, and carceral logics. Although many of the depictions of Dahmer examined in this study were billed—and often received by audiences—as "just" entertainment products, they carry much more significance as vehicles of meaning; they are morality tales for the media age.

Data Availability Statement

Research data are not shared.

Endnotes

[1] As profit-orientations have become more prominent in news and other forms of media over the last 50 years, media logic has shifted to reflect these changes (McChesney 2000). Profit-maximization is built in large part on generating sustainably dedicated audiences, and this prioritizes content that aligns with audience expectations of formats, frames, and functions.

[2] Definitions of serial murder remain subject to fierce debate. See Petherick et al. (2022) for more on the evolution of the term and the various methodologies used to assess its prevalence.

[3] The *Inside Edition* interview with Dahmer was considered by many analysts as a landmark moment for that show (Frost 2013). According to Nielsen ratings, the *Dateline* episode that included Dahmer's interview was the program's highest-rated broadcast ever at the time of its airing (Zoglin 1994).

[4] Popular culture includes much more than just material artifacts; it is, for most analysts, an all-encompassing and seemingly indefinable term, although Cusic and Faulk (2009) summarize it as an array of products, services, and material goods in areas such as the arts, culture, entertainment, and commerce.

[5] Digital media have now replaced physical media as a primary source for both information and entertainment for most media consumers (Park and McClain 2025).

[6] Conboy (2007) discusses how headlines are intentionally crafted to draw attention and to summarize the story to which they are connected, giving them an important role in framing news content and guiding interpretations for audiences.

[7] *The New York Times* was chosen specifically as a source for headlines in this study because of its accessibility through digital archives and evidence, suggesting that it had long played an important role in setting the news-making agenda for other news organizations (see Golan 2006). The *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel* and *Chicago Tribune* were chosen for their relative proximity to the Milwaukee slayings. The general web search allowed for review of headlines from nontargeted news sources from that period as well.

[8] Original analyses were carried out for media representing most of these technologies and formats, although some media types—for example, Tik Tok or YouTube—feature such vast and voluminous content that they do not align neatly with the analytical approach incorporated in this project; to account for that, extant research on how Dahmer is depicted in these media was used to buttress the analysis.

[9] Examples of headlines in the *New York Times* assigning blame to systematic failures in Milwaukee's police department and other agencies included: "Slayings Point Up Lapses By Milwaukee's Agencies," "Scrutiny of Police Sought in Milwaukee," "Police in Milwaukee Knew About Suspect," and "Health System Failed in Milwaukee Tragedy."

[10] Content from this interview that was not used in the March broadcast was repackaged for a November 1994 *Dateline* broadcast dubbed "The Final Interview." The November 1994 broadcast was analyzed in the present study.

[11] See Bonifazi et al. (2022) for an overview of how the use of names in communication can signify interactional order, status, and power.

[12] A search of "Jeffrey Dahmer wiki" revealed dozens of user-run websites dedicated to chronicling Dahmer as well as numerous Reddit threads and content in other forums.

[13] A prominent example is "Dark Horse," a song released by Katy Perry (one of the most famous American pop stars of the era), which included a Dahmer-related verse (sung by a guest rapper): "She's a beast, I call her Karma. She eat your heart out like Jeffrey Dahmer." The song was immensely popular, rising to become the number one song in the United States and Canada (and top 10 in several other countries) and remaining on the charts for over a year; at the time of this writing, the official music video has over 4 billion views on *YouTube*. The scope and longevity of its popularity have introduced Dahmer as a character in popular culture to a variety of new audiences since its release.

[14] The remaining four episodes featured a relatively equal focus on dissecting Dahmer's criminal motives and detailing his criminal acts.

[15] According to Rickard (2023), more than 60% of Reddit users report they regularly discuss true crime series on social media, and a similar number claim to participate in case-specific discussions in online communities.

[16] YouTube is a video-sharing website introduced in 2005 that provides users with access to free online videos (both user-generated and released by media companies), podcasts, and music. TikTok is a social media platform that was released in 2018 and became widely popular during the COVID-19 pandemic. Users share and view short-form videos to share information and build or engage in participatory culture that involves humor and the ability to remix and reinterpret content.

[17] A full version of the *Inside Edition* interview posted in November 2018—titled: "Inside the Mind of Jeffrey Dahmer: Serial Killer's Chilling Jailhouse Interview"—has garnered nearly 45 million views (a version of the *Dateline* interview uploaded in 2021 has nearly 3 million views).

[18] See Livingstone (2003) and Barkemeyer et al. (2017) for discussion of the opportunities and challenges involved in global media comparative research.

[19] Lecter, who was created as a behavioral composite of several notorious killers and other figures, has, since the film's release, become widely venerated "as a celebrity, as an icon, as a cult hero" (Oleson 2005, 189).

[20] Months after the election, Trump spoke about the value of invoking Hannibal Lecter in his campaign rhetoric during a dinner hosted by the National Republican Congressional Committee, noting: "They used to go crazy when I talked about—when I talk about Hannibal Lecter. The late great Hannibal Lecter. Right? *Silence of the Lambs*. The fake news would say, "Why does he talk about that? He's a fictional character." He's not. We have many of them that came across the border. He's actually not. But when the people went to the voting booth, then we understood why he talked about that because they voted for us ... The great Hannibal Lecter. He was, uh—he was a very important force." (Hartmann 2025).

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