

MYSTERIOUS MOTIVATIONS OF PODCAST LISTENERS

by Julie Turner

On her long commutes to USC's School of Journalism and Mass Communications, **Kelli Boling** found herself turning to episodic podcasts to pass the miles.

The more she listened, the more she gravitated toward true crime or unsolved criminal case podcasts. Naturally, the Ph.D. student wondered why. Since then, her curiosity has grown into the backbone of her innovative research into who is listening to true crime podcasts and why they're so captivated by them.

"Serial was the first podcast to achieve media fame, and it drew more listeners to podcasts," she says. "I also think there's something key in the portability of podcasts. People turn to their phones in times of boredom. We have movies, games, music, television and the internet at our fingertips. Podcasts add one more layer of entertainment possibilities so we don't get bored with our cures for boredom."

Boling says researchers classify the rise of podcasting into two eras: before the widely popular 2014 season of the "Serial" podcast and everything after. Before the original season of "Serial," only 27 percent of people had listened to a podcast. By 2018, the number jumped to 44 percent.

Boling says many true crime podcasts up the entertainment ante with another element of intrigue: the ability to participate in the investigation.

"Undisclosed is famous for this. They regularly solicit leads from listeners and several have put them in touch with experts who have been able to contribute to cases," she says. "Many podcasts have very interactive online communities, and they post case documents and photos of evidence online so listeners can really get as deep as they want into the case."

The unsolved subgenre has very active and engaged followers, says Boling. "In our survey, we found that 83 percent of true crime podcast listeners believe the podcasts are having an impact on the cases they cover."

But who exactly is listening?

Boling says a 2010 study found that women are attracted to true crime books because they have female lead characters and also because readers feel they can glean information from the books for their own survival if something should ever happen to them. With a 73 percent female audience, Boling's true crime podcast research confirmed women are just as interested in podcasts — with a surprising twist or two.

"Our study found there is an aspect of social interaction," she says. "Women like to listen to the podcasts so they can discuss them with friends." There's also a key finding beyond shared conversation, says Boling. "Women listen to escape from their daily lives and because they have stronger voyeuristic tendencies than men."

Boling is working with professor **Kevin Hull** on other audience motivations for future research. "We just finished a project on the "Missing Richard Simmons" podcast," Boling

says. "We looked at the motivation behind creating the podcast — to make contact with a celebrity — and how the producers and participants were using the media in a very unique way."

In the future, Boling plans to study yet another subset of the true crime podcast audience as part of her dissertation. "There was an op-ed published in the New York Times by a female domestic abuse survivor. She said she listened to true crime podcasts as a form of exposure therapy. I hope to dig a little deeper into that."

