



## Gender Bias in the Smiley Face Killer Theory

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The Smiley Face Killer Theory attempts to connect the river deaths of affluent (Nolasco, 2019), white, college-age (19-23) men in the Midwestern United States (Kaye, 2008; Piehl, 2008). The theory claims that these accidental deaths<sup>1</sup> have been misclassified and are instead connected to a web of serial predators (Smith, 2019). The alleged organization targets these victims and frames their deaths as accidental drownings (Egan, 2019). By examining the significant number of female river homicides in the U.S., one can see that young men are not the only bodies being pulled from rivers. Therefore, the assumption underlying this theory, that only male drowning victims are noteworthy, is flawed.

Proponents of the Smiley Face Killer Theory claim that the group targeted in these river deaths consists of popular, athletic and good-looking males. However, their sample does not include elderly or middle-aged men, “ugly men,” any women (McBride, 2008, 1), and rarely, non-white victims (Kane, 2013).

The apparent absence of female decedents was noted as early as 2004 by Morgan and Vogt, professors at the University of Wisconsin—La Crosse. Morgan specializes in the psychology of cognitive bias, and Vogt, a nationally known homicide researcher, attempted to address what they believed were ongoing questions about the theory. They asserted that women are socialized against wandering alone at night (Morgan & Vogt, 2004), but fell short of attacking the empirical data sample.

Mother of Minneapolis river victim Christopher Jenkins reported her observation referring to two different samples of alleged victims noting, “curiously enough, though young women drink alcohol and binge drink, they aren't disappearing and showing up days, weeks, or months later in water” (Jenkins, 2009, p. 270). None of the blog samples were female.

Absence of females in the sample was also noted by a blogger who stated, “It’s a pertinent fact that young women are rarely found ‘drowned of misadventure’ after partying in bars or being out late at night. It seems to be a peculiarly and recent male occurrence [sic]”

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<sup>1</sup> Some deaths were suicides or probable suicides—depending on the sample construct. Only two male homicide river deaths have affirmatively been identified. Furthermore, additional unwitnessed deaths were sometimes ruled “undetermined” by the medical examiner or coroner.

(Winter, 2018, para. 3). The detectives behind the theory suggest that the killers may have targeted this group out of envy or jealousy for their apparent privilege (Nolasco, 2019). If males were being specifically targeted, the Smiley Face Killer Theory then assumes that women's bodies are never found dead in rivers.

To test their claim, 200 cases of women's bodies being pulled from rivers were identified using open-source data collection techniques. All cases occurred since 2010 in the United States. Thirty-two, or 16%, have conclusively been ruled homicides and 13.5% (26) of the cases involved a college-age (19-24) decedent. When the cause of death was known for these victims, more than half (52.9%) of victims drowned. Most significantly, none of the homicides in this age group were caused by drowning. Of female river homicide victims being analyzed, 14 (43.75%) were killed by an intimate or sexual partner or a close family member. There was no evidence to support the idea that any of these homicides were the work of a 'serial killer' (or stranger).

Three cases illustrate circumstances similar to that of males who died in an accidental drowning—Kaitlin Kenney, Moriah Zwart, and Abbey Russell.

According to news reports, Kaitlin Kenney died in the Colorado River. "Kenney, who was an award-winning fiddler, was last seen by friends on Jan 11" (Heller, 2013, para. 2). The 21-year-old graduate of the University of Montana and her friends were drinking one night during a rafting trip in the Grand Canyon. She left the campsite that evening and never returned. "Kenney's relatives said that they believe she had vanished in the night while trying to use the bathroom and likely lost her way or fallen in the river" (Heller, 2013, para. 3).

Kenney disappeared from a gathering of friends and was found more than 2 months later dead in the river. The *Daily Mail* reports, "the autopsy of a young woman... revealed that she had been drinking excessively at the time of her death." The report further states that "her apparent decision to drink...comes in contrast to her journal entries... 'drinking out of control... is probably the most dangerous thing we can be doing'...dated 4 days before she disappeared." Her brother, Ryan Kenney, said she was "not a big drinker," but the autopsy report estimated her blood alcohol level to be 0.11 at the time of death (Daily, 2013, para. 6).

Moriah Zwart disappeared one night and was found 6 days later in the Minnesota River (Twin, 2015). She had been camping with a friend and they were drinking at the time of her disappearance. "An autopsy revealed Zwart had a blood-alcohol content of more than .08 percent, the legal limit for driving" despite the fact that Zwart was not "a regular drinker." The Le Sueur County Medical Examiner concluded the cause of death was drowning with no sign of foul play (Linehan, 2015, para. 4, 8).

Abbey Russell was reported missing around 2am on April 25. She "went out with friends Friday night" but "Russell's roommate told police she woke up to Russell's phone ringing and her roommate gone" (NBC, 2015, para. 2, 3). Her body was found in the St. Croix River in Stillwater, Minnesota on May 2. The Ramsey County Medical Examiner reported that she had a blood alcohol content of .336 at the time of death. Official cause of death was ruled 'drowning' with no suspicion of foul play (Kather, 2015, para. 2).

These cases illustrate that late-night alcohol-related drownings, while tragic, are not mysterious. In each case, the victim was drinking at night with a friend or group of friends. Each then got separated from the group, and in a drunken state, ended up in the river, and subsequently drowned. Despite the

lack of information in each female disappearance, there is no mention of homicide, abduction, or torture. Interestingly, absence of data was never used as an opportunity to propose absurd theories of their demise. These cases demonstrate that principle and reveal that drowning deaths are not limited to male victims.

The exclusion of female cases demonstrates a gender bias of the proposed theory as well as the refusal of investigators to accept logical alternative explanations. The Kenney, Zwart and Russell cases detail late-night disappearances from alcohol-related gatherings, which led to drowning death incidents of white, college-age individuals in the Midwestern and Western United States. While these cases were ruled accidental in nature, they could easily have been misconstrued as the work of a Smiley Face Killer. They fit nearly all the criteria, but because the victims are female, the cases would be disregarded, revealing a sexist bias of the Smiley Face Killer Theory investigators' data sample as well.

The Smiley Face Killer Theory fails to acknowledge female river deaths. This practice may cognitively hinder examining the deaths of women found in rivers as homicides. Although this research focused on bodies found in rivers (not lakes, ponds, canals, sloughs, oceans, etc.), female river deaths provide a necessary contrast to the alleged Smiley Face Killer Theory cases. Furthermore, the circumstances of female river homicide are known and are not the work of a mysterious web of serial predators. A theory that implies that female river deaths do not occur in significant numbers is based on an inherently biased sample construction. Additionally, a theory that proposes that men are killed by complete strangers seems highly unlikely when women are almost exclusively killed by those closest to them.

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