**The Impacts of New Media on Copycat Crime:**

**An Overview**

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**Introduction**

*The Nature of Copycat Crime*

First coined by Sarah Jewett (1896), the term copycat has become a common part of our modern culture. Referring to the fact that people copy the models of behavior that they see exhibited by those around them, this modeling process has been conceptualized to occur through any of a number of different biological, psychological, and social processes. However, the behavior that is modeled may not always conform to the norms, values, and culture of the society in which they are exhibited. This negative form of the modeling process may be seen in behaviors such as copycat crime.

Copycat crime is considered both an individual and social level phenomena where people have chosen to copy a prior crime that has been modeled in the media. A copycat criminal, an individual that chooses to commit a crime as a result of the information and models received from the media, is then exposed to this prior media-publicized or portrayed generator crime. This exposure leads to the incorporation of elements of the generator crime, such as the crime’s motivation, victim, or technique, into the later copycat crime. Copycat crimes differ in their content, complexity, form, and duration. In addition, the type and amount of media exposure to criminogenic content (media content that encourages crime) as well as different copycat criminal characteristics will also impact participation in copycat crime (Surette, 2012b).

Copycat criminals are expected to differ on a number of characteristics including their demographics, perceptions, social environment, criminal histories, and exposure and interaction with the media. It has been hypothesized that those who are predisposed to criminal behavior, being a prior offender further increases the impacts, are more likely influenced by criminogenic content, and thus more likely to commit a copycat crime. In addition to the variation that exists among copycat criminal characteristics, there are also variations in the level of copycat crimes committed based on geographic locations, societal cultures and norms, and time period. This leads to two different models of copycat crime: the aggregate model and the individual model (Surette, 2012b). The first of these two models is the aggregate model which examines why societies differ in their levels of crime, types of crime, and how crime is displayed. The aggregate model breaks down the copycat crime process into two phases. In Phase A, crimes do not necessarily come to the media’s attention, or need to come to the media’s attention, to lead to copycats due to the larger preexisting pool of potential offenders. For example, Phase A would include a great deal of property crime. In Phase B, a secondary “at-risk” pool of potential copycat criminals is introduced and second-order copycat crimes are possible. In Phase B, generator crimes are picked up by the media, and, they are usually violent events. It is these crimes that the media places the most emphasis on, even though they are the rarest crimes, and it is this criminogenic media content that causes most people to fear violent copycat crime (Surette, 2012e).

The second model, the individual model, looks at the processes by which someone becomes a copycat criminal. The first path is systematic central processing, and is the least used process. Usually leading to instrumental copycat crimes, such as property crimes, systematic central processing is largely dependent on motivation and planning as it is about decisions that the individual feels are important. However, the decision maker must have access to information that helps them to make their choice; this is where the media may provide techniques or instructions. The second path is heuristic peripheral processing, and is a more frequently used process. Usually leading to emotive copycat crimes, such as violent fights, heuristic peripheral processing usually involves emotional, spontaneous, and opportunistic decisions to be made. The third and final path is narrative persuasion, and it is the most used process. Usually leading to empathy or identification through transportation and engagement (the media’s ability to provide escapism from reality into the world of the narrative), in narrative persuasion, people interact with the media with the intent of using the information they obtain to make decisions. Narrative persuasion highlights the media’s ability to transform attitudes and opinions, such as the belief that copycat crime is a good idea, and thus, to influence the behaviors of those exposed to the media’s content, such as potential copycat criminals. These three paths all lead to the psychological states of priming and script activation, which then leads to copycat crime performance. In the individual model, many learn how to commit a crime from the media. However, most do not copy the models that they see; implementation of media models is the key (Surette, 2012d).

In addition to these two models, there are two dimensions that lead to four main types of copycat crime. The two dimensions are based on time and motive. In crimes that are considered emotive and instantaneous, there is very little planning and evaluation that takes place prior to copying behavior. In contrast, thought and consideration goes into copying behaviors when the crimes are more instrumental and delayed. Those copycat crimes that are more emotive and spontaneous should be rarer as all of the precursors that are necessary must be available at the same time and available at close proximity for predispositions to turn into the opportunity to copy (Surette, 2012b).

Besides these two dimensions, other dimensions include whether the copycat crime is genesis or metamorphic in nature. Looking at whether the media acts as a trigger (genesis-media attention leads to crimes that otherwise may not have occurred) or a rudder (metamorphic-crime is molded by media attention), this dimension looks at the role of the media in copycat crime. If a crime is a genesis crime, it would not occur without the media’s influence. On the other hand, metamorphic copycat crimes occur in different forms due to the influence of the media, but the crime would have occurred regardless of the media exposure. Another dimension brings to attention that copycat crime varies based on the type of crime. This dimension may compare property versus violent crime, planned versus impulsive crime, or rational versus irrational crime. These crime types tend to overlap and interact with the type of media exposure and are related to the cognitive processes that are utilized. Whether a copycat crime is full, exact mimics, or partial, borrowed pieces of behavior, is another dimension considered. In a full copycat crime, every element of the crime is modeled from media coverage. However, partial copycat crimes are more likely because people are rational beings. With partial copycat crimes, there may not be a generator crime. Instead, the copycat criminal takes parts from many different crimes and uses them as a composite for their crime (Surette, 2012b).

Yet another dimension is whether the copycat crime was high profile, with the goal of publicity, or low profile, with the goal of reducing risk. The motivations of copycat criminals will vary depending on whether the copycat criminal wants media exposure, as is the case with high profile copycat crimes, or whether they seek to copy the crime because they feel as though it will reduce their chances of failure, apprehension, and punishment, as is the case with low profile crimes. The copycat crime process also varies based on whether the copycat crime is simple or complex. Simple copycat crimes are more likely to be copied due to the ease of learning the crime modeled. More complex copycat crimes are less common but tend to be covered more by the media. Yet another dimension is whether the copycat criminal is a loner or prefers to commit their copycat crimes in groups. There is an expectation that the preferences of the copycat criminal to act alone, as part of a collective behavior, as part of a team, or part of a gang or mob is going to depend partially on the characteristics of the copycat offender as well as on the characteristics of the collective. Another consideration is whether the copycat crime was a stand-alone event, which relies on individual level of analysis, or part of a life cycle, which relies on the examination of aggregate waves and diffusion patterns. Stand-alone copycat crimes are isolated events in which one copycat criminal copies. However, when there are multiple copycat crimes with one following another, a pattern is developed. The first part of this pattern is the campaign (events that take place over months in one location) followed by a wave (a series of campaigns over the course of months that take place in different locations), followed by cycles (combinations of waves and the addition of new behaviors that diffuse from media centers to rural areas of a society), and finally concluding with the copycat end life (electronic gatherings). Finally, there is an interaction between the type of medium exposure and the copycat crime, with visual media models being the most likely to be copied (Surette, 2012b).

Keeping these dimensions in mind, copycat crime is hypothesized to be a process in which some crimes, usually those that are successful and engaging, are shown by the media and become prime candidates for copying. These crimes are thought to result from the interaction of four main areas. The first of these areas is the generator crime and the criminal model. The other areas include subsequent media coverage, social context, and the characteristics of potential copycat criminals. The media coverage of the crime first impacts individuals by allowing them the opportunity to identify with the generator crime and the criminal model. This provides a pool of potential copycat criminals with the size of the pool being influenced by the amount of media exposure, social factors, the existence of social conflicts, the number of opportunities available for copycat crime, the nature of the media, and the size of the preexisting criminal population. For example, the United States can expect to have a high rate of copycat crime based on the high level of criminogenic media, the amount of media that is given from the offender’s point of view, the large preexisting offender population, the setting, and a culture that is rooted in a violent history (Surette, 2012b).

There are also a number of correlates that should be mentioned as well. Copycat offenders are often seen as having an emersion in criminogenic media. This means that they prefer crime content when engaging with media, which they often consume in high amounts. They tend to focus on a single media source, which they use for information or learning. Copycat offenders do not see law-abiding behavior as rewarding, and often identify with media offenders. They see media personalities as leaders and friends to the exclusion of interpersonal contacts. Copycat offenders are also weakly networked into law-abiding groups while being strongly networked into deviant groups. They place a decreased value on peers and family and generally have weak social bonds (Surette, 2012c). Copycat offenders are also criminally innovative, disinhibited, and often delusional. They have a high interest in law enforcement and guns, but have resentments toward persecution. Their intelligence is mixed (those who are of high intelligent are able to receive information but have lower persuasive yielding while those of lower intelligence are less able to receive information but have higher persuasive yielding), and they seek assistance on easy tasks. Copycat offenders enjoy seeing laws broken and authority defied. They have a history of reward for imitation, but their criminal history shows an inconsistent pattern in the punishment of deviancy (Surette, 2012c). The setting of copycat offenders, their family, neighborhood, and cultural influences, also play a factor. Copycat offenders tend to have a pervasive culture of crime, and enjoy crime saturated media. They have supportive social conditions that increase the permissibility of crime and the functional value of crime. Crime is seen as being rewarding, justified, and is usually unchallenged by those surrounding copycat offenders. They may also have criminogenic parents that provide real life models for the copycat offender. Finally, the offender may be experiencing racial strife, income disparity, and other detrimental social conditions (Surette, 2012c).

In addition to the hypotheses of copycat crime that have previously been mentioned, there are also some others that are supported by the literature. The first of these hypotheses is that criminogenic media content will concentrate its influence in preexisting criminal populations. This has been supported by research that has found that as much as 25 percent of offenders engage in copycat crime according to self-reports. This hypothesis is further supported by research that has found that this rate is much lower in non-incarcerated populations. The second hypothesis is that the effect of the media tends to be more qualitative than quantitative, meaning that media content tends to impact criminal behavior rather than the number of criminals. Most of the research that supports this hypothesis shows that preexisting offenders tend to use the media as a way to borrow crime techniques. This gives foundation to the claim that the media tends to act as a rudder more often than as a trigger for copycat crime. The final hypothesis is that copycat criminals are more likely to be career criminals who are involved in property crimes rather than first-time offenders or offenders that are committing violent crimes. This is supported by the research that finds that offenders report using the media as a way to learn techniques for committing crime, usually property crimes, rather than as a motivation to commit a violent crime (Surette, 2012b). Given that the media plays such a crucial role in the copycat crime process, it is important to also look at the nature of the media, particularly in modern society the emergence of “new media.”

*The Nature of New Media*

New media has been given many definitions since its inception in latter part of the 20th century. Some have defined new media based solely on certain technical features or content channels. However, others reject such definitions in favor of definitions that technological social, political, and economic factors and define new media as information and communication technologies and the social contexts in which they operate (Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2006). Regardless of the specific definition, new media is known to refer to media that allows for on-demand access to content at any time, from any location, on any digital device. Unlike traditional media, new media allows for interactive user feedback and the creative participation of users. In addition, new media provides a medium for the formation of communities around shared interests in media content. However, one of the most important attributes of new media is the “democratization” of the creation, publishing, distribution, and consumption of media content (Socha & Eber-Schmid, n.d.). For a medium to be considered new media, it must also be digital, having the characteristics of being able to be manipulated, networked, dense, compressible, and interactive. In addition, new media, unlike traditional media, have the capability of the real-time generation of new content that has no regulations (Socha & Eber-Schmid, n.d.).

According to Lievrouw and Livingstone (2006), new media infrastructures contain three essential components: the artefacts or devices used to transmit information, the activities and practices in which people engage in an effort to transmit this information, and the social arrangements or organizational forms that arise from those artefacts or devices and activities or practices. While all technologies and forms of media may be explained as having these three components, what is important for to note is that new media differs in its configuration of these three components (Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2006). In new media forms, the artefacts or devices are digital in nature, the activities and practices are much more interactive than with traditional media, and social arrangements form around online content rather than personal interaction.

This defining of new media in terms of its component features rather than providing a standardized definition extends to other areas as well. It may loosely be described as a way of organizing new technologies, skills, and processes that change quickly. The ability of these new technologies to evolve quickly, changing form and function, is part of the reason that new media has been so difficult to describe (Socha & Eber-Schmid, n.d.). One trend that seems to be a feature of new media regardless of who is providing the definition is that it has provided a limitless opportunity as a communication channel, as a way for innovation and diffusion to take place, and as a way of changing the methods by which the global community is educated. These new media possibilities lie in their use of words, sounds, and images which differ from those of traditional media due to their nesting quality. Nesting is described as a way to organize and present information according to the subject while only providing secondary attention to the context. Instead of following a straight order, new media content is organized in a fashion that allows content elements to interact with one another, as seen in hyperlinking (Socha & Eber-Schmid, n.d.). Not only do these elements interact with one another, but new media organization also allows for each element to stand alone as well. This has allowed for new media to overcome the previous restrictions imposed by the linear formats of traditional media.

Many forms of new media exist, with these existing forms constantly evolving and new forms being created. One example, the Internet, has been the most influential in creating a global community. The Internet is a global system of interconnected computer networks that use the Internet Protocol Suite (TCP/IP). These networks contain billions of users and millions of private and public agencies, businesses, academics, and governments connected in a global community by a variety of electronic, wireless, and optic networking and technological processes. Although the origins of the research for the Internet began in the 1960s, the origin of the Internet we know today was officially launched in 1982. By the 1990s, the Internet, through websites, blogging, email, instant messaging, web feeds, and other features, has changed the nature of human interaction (Socha & Eber-Schmid, n.d.). The ability of the Internet to have such far reaching impacts is evidenced by the increased use of the Internet since its inception. While there are widely differing estimations of this growth, during the latter part of the 1990s, it was estimated that traffic on the Internet grew by 100 percent per year with the mean annual growth of Internet users was estimated to grow by 20 percent to fifty percent during that same time (Coffman & Odlyzko, 1998). Other statistics have shown that as of 1995, 0.4 percent of the worldwide population was using the Internet. However, by December 2011, that estimate had grown to 2.267 billion users or 32.7 percent of the worldwide population (Internet Growth Statistics, 2012). Due to the amount of information that is available on the Internet, and the increase in use of the Internet by the worldwide community, has led to major social changes as a result of its creation.

Other impacts of the Internet can be seen in the nature and number of the websites available to Internet users. A website is a set of interrelated web pages that contain media content such as images, videos, audio, text, etc. It is usually hosted on one server and is accessible to billions through networking via a Uniform Resource Locator (URL). Websites are usually transferred with the Hypertext Transfer Protocol (HTTP) which uses encryption to provide user security and privacy. While some websites may require a fee for access, most websites are free for users. Others, like the online encyclopedia Wikipedia, are interactive in nature allowing for the combination of Internet accessible digital text, images and videos with web links, creative participation and contribution by users, interactive feedback from other users, and the formation of an online community by editors, contributors, and users of the site (New Media, 2012). In addition, there may be other types of websites including a personal website, a commercial website, a government website, or a nonprofit organization website. Much like the Internet, statistics on the increased prevalence of websites vary widely. It is estimated that as of December 2011, there were 555 million websites. This exemplifies the vast amount of information that is available to users of new media (Internet 2011 in Numbers, 2012).

Another example of new media is multimedia. Multimedia is “the use of computers to present text, graphics, video, animation, and sound in an integrated way” (Webopedia, 2012). While multimedia had long been seen as the future revolution in the computing realm, it was not until the mid-1990s that the technology was affordable enough for multimedia to become commonplace. Almost all computers are now capable of multimedia functions, which make the possible influence of this type of new media extensive (Webopedia, 2012).

Video games are also considered a form of new media. Video games are electronic games that require the interaction between a human user and a user interface to generate feedback that is visual on a digital display device. The output devices may range from those that are rather large in scale to those that are handheld, and users interact with the game via a controller. The earliest forms of video games date back to the 1940s, however, modern forms of video games began in the 1970s with the game “Computer Space,” widely cited as the first coin-operated video game that was sold commercially. Since that time, the prevalence of video game users has increased dramatically. Although statistics, once again, vary widely, it is estimated that computer and video game sales grew 22.9 percent in 2008 which more than quadrupled industry sales since 1996. Further estimates from that same year found that 68 percent of American households playing computer or video games with 63 percent of parents believing that their children’s playing of the games is a beneficial part of their lives (FYI: Video Game Statistics, 2010). The reach of video games can be seen in these statistics. There are a large number of video game players, and the overarching social attitude seems to be that video games are more beneficial than harmful. This leads to a greater potential influence from video games and their content.

Social media, another example of new media, is becoming increasingly popular in modern culture. Social media uses web-based and mobile technologies to turn communications into interactive dialogues between organizations, individuals, and communities. Further defined by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), social media is “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (61). There are many different types of social media including collaborative projects (such as Wikipedia), blogs and microblogs (such as Twitter), content communities (such as YouTube), social networking sites (such as Facebook), virtual game worlds (such as World of Warcraft), and virtual social worlds (such as Second Life). However, despite the type of social media that is being used, it is clear that social media has increased. According to one report, social media comprised 75 percent of Internet surfing in 2008 by joining social networks, reading blogs, or contributing reviews to a website. This was a significant increase from the previous year in which social media comprised only 56 percent of Internet surfing. It may be extrapolated that the percentage would be even higher in 2012 (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The number of users in these interactive forums displays the potential of social media to influence attitudes and behaviors of the vast number of users through content that is largely created by the users themselves and is largely unregulated.

DVDs and CD-ROMs are also examples of new media which help to distinguish new from traditional media. All forms of new media, whether created on a computer form the beginning or are converted from analog sources, are composed of digital code and are thus numerical in nature. The second dimension on which new media differs from traditional media is on that of modularity. New media has a more fractal nature than traditional media in that it contains bits and pieces that together make up a whole, but that can also stand alone as their own entities (Manovich, 2001). This fractal nature is clearly seen in Internet websites that contain hyperlinks. Automation is yet another dimension along with new and traditional media differ. This refers to the numerical coding and modular structure of the media which allows for media creation, manipulation, and access. There is far more automaticity with regards to new media as computers allow for content to be more easily created, more easily manipulated once created, and allows for easy access by Internet and other new media users. Further differences exist in variability, with new media being much more fluid than traditional media in its creation, adaptation, and use. Another aspect for consideration when examining new media is the dimension of transcoding. Manovich (2001) described new media as bringing two layers: the computer layer and the media/culture layer. It was his assertion that new media has led to an age where the two layers have influenced each other to form a computer culture: “a blend of human and computer meanings, of traditional ways human culture modeled the world and computer’s own ways to represent it” (64).

Wide social and cultural changes have also been associated with these new forms of media previously described. The first is the shift from modernity to postmodernity. Usually this shift is described in terms of the sweeping social and cultural changes that transpired after the 1960s. Often considered the result of changing structural and economic social systems, the changes that new media is having on modern society may also be seen as furthering this shift into postmodernism. New media may also be seen as intensifying the globalization process. There is no longer the national boundaries that previously existed on trade, corporate organization, customs, cultures, identities, beliefs, and norms that previously existed. New media has been seen to be a major contributing factor in this process (Lister, Dovey, Giddings, Grant, & Kelly, 2003). In addition, new media has led to a transformation, at least in the West, from an industrial age of manufacturing to a post-industrial information age. This has required a shift in employment, skill, investment, and profit in the production of goods and the provision of services. Finally, there has been a decentralization in the previously centralized geo-political centers. The mechanisms and powers of the Western colonial centers have been weakened and exert less power as the national boundaries of traditional media have been overstepped by new media channels. (Lister et al., 2003).

Other social and cultural changes that have been hypothesized to take place as a result of new media impacts also include those at the individual level. One of these impacts is the changing of the textual experience. New media has led to new genres, textual forms, forms of entertainment and pleasure, and ways of consuming media. New media has also led to new ways for users to experience and represent the world. While these ways are not always be clearly defined, new media offers the opportunity for changes in experience and representation to occur (Lister et al., 2003). There may also be differences in the relationships between users and new technologies associated with new media. Changes in the ways that users receive images and communications in their everyday lives, and the meanings that are involved, differ with new media due to its interactive and on-demand nature. The new experiences that are possible with new media have also had impacts on the ways in which users define themselves and their community. There have been shifts in the personal and social experiences that are felt through time, space, and place that all have implications for the ways in which people behave (Lister et al., 2003). In many cases, personal relationships have been replaced by relationships in online communities where people share similar interests and self-identities.

These impacts of new media have been seen as having intense impacts on three of the most important social categories usually under consideration in the research. Economically, new media, especially the Internet, has provided a global commercial skeleton (Socha & Eber-Schmid, n.d.). It allows businesses to more easily communicate with one another, their distributors, and their consumers. It provides a way to conduct transactions instantaneously with businesses and consumers that were not easily reached prior to the advent of new media. In addition, it has provided a way for businesses to increase their visibility in a competitive global market. New media has not only become the product itself, but also a way to change the process of electronic commerce. New media has also had an influence on the political climate (Socha & Eber-Schmid, n.d.). Politicians are able to garner support and voters for their campaigns by reaching out through new electronic avenues. Potential voters are now able to instantly gain access to a wealth of information about the politicians themselves, the issues involved in the campaign, and websites and blogs that provide facts and opinions on candidates and issues. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, new media has the potential to change the process by which ideas are exchanged (Socha & Eber-Schmid, n.d.). New media provides on-demand access to information and is interactive in nature. This allows users to communicate across vast distances with others who are like-minded and to find information on any subject imaginable. This has the potential ability to expand the international mind beyond the limitations imposed by traditional media which is often more localized in context.

The ability of new media to influence these important social systems has led many to wonder what future impacts new media will have on norms and culture as it continues to evolve. One important consideration for any society is the impacts that new media will have on crime.

*Theoretical Discussion of New Media Copycat Crime*

Copycat crime has been defined by many as the imitation of an initial, or generator, crime. Thus, imitation is important in any discussion of copycat crime. Gabriel Tarde was the first to connect the process of imitation with that of copycat crime in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Describing the phenomenon under the term “suggest-imitative” assaults, Tarde observed that violent crimes that were sensational in nature seemed to produce similar incidents. He described copycat crime by stating that, “Epidemics of crime follow the line of the telegraph,” meaning that crimes seemed to spread through societies in waves in a downward (from upper classes to lower classes) and outward (from urban cities to rural areas) fashion. While Tarde did believe that crime was imitated, just as law abiding behavior, he also felt that because crime was fundamentally different from law abiding behavior, the imitation process for criminal behavior would also differ from the imitation of law abiding behavior. Tarde also believed that some of the differences between criminals and non-criminals were based on psychological predispositions, individual choice, social conditions, and sometimes even chance circumstances all played a role in whether or not someone becomes involved in criminal activities (Surette, 2012g).

Tarde felt as though copycat crime was common as criminals were copying even when they were innovating. He felt that innovation was simply a combination of copies that had been obtained from various sources. He also examined the transition from the crowd to the public. Tarde thought that crowds were an older form of human interaction and thought of crowds in a very negative fashion. However, the advent of the media (particularly journalism) has led to a more sophisticated type of interaction which he called the public. Journalism allowed for a national perspective and an international public mind that had not previously existed (Surette, 2012a). Although Tarde did not examine new media effects on copycat, he laid the groundwork for the explanations of these effects that were to come.

Early explanations of crowd behavior in the 1800s in addition to Tarde included those of Charles Mackay and Gustave LeBon. However, it was the 1920s before collective behavior became a term that was studies in the literature. The idea of collective behavior was that people act differently when they part of a crowd. This behavior may be positive or negative depending on the context of the situation (Surette, 2012a). Two types of collective behavior that have been discussed are fads and fashions. Fads are the less predictable of the two types of behavior. They also have shorter life cycles that tend to be more intense than that of fashions. In addition, they are often more trivial. Fashions are longer term trends that allow social segregation and elitism (Surette, 2012a). The media plays a central role in these processes as the collective community that is formed by those engaged with the media serve to transform individual ideas and innate behaviors (Surette, 2012f).

Fads are similar to copycat crimes in their life cycles. It is hypothesized that both begin with a latent period, one in which the behavior has always been present. This is followed by a breakout period where the behavior is adopted by those outside of the original group. The media may play an important role in reaching this stage of the life cycle. Through the process of diffusion, a peaking period is reached. It is at this stage where the fad or copycat crime receives a great deal of media attention and many people adopt the behavior. Following the peaking period, there is usually a bubble burst which leads to a decline period in which the behavior gets relabeled, is seen as a disadvantage, and may return to the original core group. Conditions that lead to fads are often social in their nature. If there is more structural conduciveness, or free choice, there are likely more fads, and thus more copycat crime. The amount of structural strain is also an important consideration. If there is more social mobility between hierarchical levels, there is also likely to be more fads. Social beliefs that foster fads may also lead to societies that experience more copycat crime. Finally, societies that have communication channels that are easily accessible, and a multitude of these channels, are more likely to have more fads as well (Surette, 2012f). It may be assumed that, due to its nature, although new media has not been exclusively examined in the context of collective behavior, that it likely has similar impacts as traditional media with more intensity and frequency in its ability to lead to copycat crime.

Diffusion was one of the ways that fads, fashions, and copycats could be seen as moving through a society. An aggregate social group process of imitation, diffusion has mostly been studied with a focus on prosocial positive behaviors. In looking at which individuals adopt innovations and why, it is believed that there are a number of reasons why diffusion occurs. A major determinant of whether an innovation is adopted is whether the innovation offers a relative advantage. Those that do are more likely to change the behavior of adopters in order to gain that relative advantage. It addition, those innovations that are more compatible with existing cultures and norms are more likely to be adopted as are innovations that are less complex. Having the ability to test an innovation without a major commitment may also lead to adoption as is the ability to see what consequences other adopters of the innovation have incurred prior to their own adoption. This is also applicable to copycat crime as those crimes that are copied are likely to lead to a greater advantage for the copycat criminal, will generally have motive that fits in with their culture and norms, will be less complex, will allow trialability, and will be observable (usually through media channels). The media plays a key role in this process as it allows for criminogenic models to be seen carrying out their crimes, and the new media, once again, has a greater impact on this process than traditional media.

It is important to look at the adopters when examining the diffusion process in the context of copycat crime. There are different adopters: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards. Innovators are the key to copycat crime. They imitate on faith as well as invent new crimes. They also tend to be more cosmopolitan, have a large communication network, have higher intelligence, and have more education. They are also not likely to be discouraged by failure. Those in the early majority usually commit common crimes. The adoption process provides a common, predictable pattern as to how innovation diffuses through a society. Communication channels and the media once again play large roles in this process for some, especially in regards to copycat crime. Interpersonal networks seem to be important in reinforcing behavior (Surette, 2012f). However, in many instances with new media, these communication channels are replacing traditional interpersonal social networks. In addition, news media seems to be more effective in reinforcing negative behavior (such as crime). These behaviors become less hidden through media channels, and new media provides even more channels for this to occur.

In order for fads and fashions to occur, imitation is needed. Imitation is considered a behavioral and cognitive phenomenon/drive that all humans are hardwired for due to its extreme evolutionary advantage over trial and error. The human brain breaks the process down into steps in an effort to mentally prepare for acting out the modeled behavior (Surette, 2012f). Imitation is considered part of the normal human condition. Those who are unable to appropriately imitate (such as in overimitation) may also have other social and/or cognitive dysfunctions. Imitation is also considered the default social behavior. When one finds themselves in unfamiliar surroundings, they may rely on imitation in an effort to refrain from violating the culture and norms of those around them (Surette, 2012f).

The question that becomes important for those studying copycat crime is why more imitation doesn’t occur. Many have questioned whether imitation is an innate function or a learned behavior, but for copycat crime the only thing that is important is that imitation does occur with great frequency in human behavior. Humans imitate extensively with many nuances so that imitation assists the society in which it operates. However, copycat crime, although dysfunctional, can still exist in a society for that very reason: imitation is so functional that we, as humans, are able to accept a certain amount of inappropriateness in order to keep the process (Surette, 2012f). The media plays a role in the imitation process by providing more criminogenic models to be imitated. This role is increased with new media.

Social learning is another process that relies heavily on imitation. It is the process by which most behavior is leaned and most knowledge is gained, and it is the theory with the most application to copycat crime (Surette, 2012f). The belief is that people are social creatures that learn behavior from models in their social networks with negative behavior being learned in the same manner as positive behavior. The difference in whether negative or positive behavior is imitated comes from differential association (having criminal associations that provide an excess of criminal models and definitions of behavior versus having positive associations that provide law abiding models and definitions of behavior). In contemporary society, the media is the primary source for models of social behavior, with visual models being more influential (Surette, 2012f).

The success or failure of the model has been found to be the most important factor in determining whether a behavior is copied or not; successful models more likely to be copied. Setting has also found to be more important than individual characteristics, and multiple models of behavior, emotional content, and rehearsal with detailed instructions make acquisition of criminogenic models and scripts permanent. Abstract or media presentations are just as important as face-to-face interactions, with association with the source found to be important (Surette, 2012f).

The media, especially new media, tends to bypass all traditional forms of socialization with the evolution of the media strengthening the ability to socialize learning. Media has two main roles in social learning. The first is to expand the number and reach of criminal models. This can easily be seen in the increased number of media channels with the advent of new media. The second role is as a source of criminal attitudes and instructions. The interactive nature of new media makes it more likely that potential copycats will find those who are like-minded. Interaction with other like-minded users may lead to copying of their motivations or criminal techniques (Surette, 2012f).

There are many examples of crime in modern society in which the offender claims that he/she copied what they had seen, heard, or been told while using some form of new media. This has sparked public debate and public concerns about what impact these new media channels might be having on their users. However, outside of these anecdotal stories, there has been little research that has examined the phenomenon of new media impact on copycat crime. One thing that is suggested by the existing studies is that new media inspired copycat crime seems to concentrate its influence in preexisting criminal populations. The anecdotal stories seem to indicate that most offenders that commit copycat crimes have previous criminal and/or violent histories (Surette, 2010). Although there is an indication that new media has its greatest influence in these preexisting criminal populations, and may influence a key portion (20 to 40 percent) of this population, little research has been conducted into the other roles that new media may play in the copycat crime process (Surette, 2010).

What makes the relationship between new media and potential copycat crime important is based in the differences between new and traditional media. New media has an on-demand nature which allows for the content to be largely the result of the user needs and/or wishes. New media also has a more interactive nature which allows the consumer to access the content they want, at any time they want. All of this has the potential to lead to a greater prevalence of copycat crime. New media provides users with a greater number and greater variety of potential criminogenic models to copy while encouraging imitation from vast geographic distances (Surette, 2010).

The Internet may have the greatest potential to influence possible copycat crimes and criminals as it has mass communication, interpersonal communication, and one-to-many communication capabilities. Those who have similar minds are able to easily find each other, interact, and still maintain their anonymity. This, in addition to the plethora of criminogenic models, leads to the speculation that new media has the potential to lead to the greater acquisition of criminal scripts (Surette, 2010). The acquisition of these scripts, along with the ability to rehearse behaviors in fantasy role-playing situations, as provided by video games, leads to a greater potential of copycat crime. Being able to escape reality into these fantasy worlds to rehearse their acquired criminal scripts means that new media also has the potential to influence individuals that would not have been susceptible to the criminogenic impacts of traditional media channels. This furthers the reach of the new media beyond that of preexisting criminal populations (Surette, 2010). Many examples of new media copycats illustrate these points.

**Examples of New Media Copycats**

The examples of new media copycats in modern society abound. New media allows for on-demand access to a variety of content at any time, from any location, on any digital device. Further, the interactive feedback, creative participation, and the formation of communities around media content have made new media a 20th century staple for the socialization process. According to Surette (2011), “new media are speculated to have criminogenic effects by providing avatar-like criminal models to copy.” (4) It is thought that criminal scripts may be picked up by those exposed to criminogenic media content during fantasy role-playing. This combined with the need in modern society to be special and admired by many has led to an increase in the influential impact of the media. New media also has the potential to lead to crime through communications that are interpersonal in nature and encourage unlawful acts from geographic distances. Users of new media are able to find role models who think as they do and who will interact with them, all while maintaining their anonymity. This leads to a greater potential for the media to lead to copycats as may be seen in a number of the following examples.

*The “Chocking Game”*

Many have questioned whether the Internet is making people, especially teenagers, take risks that those in earlier generations would not have. While some would argue that teenagers have always been hardwired to take foolish risks due in part to the continued formation of the brain’s prefrontal cortex, which controls decision making, during adolescence, others have disagreed. They argue that the popularity of social media sites, such as YouTube and Facebook, are forcing teenagers to conform to the virtual peer pressure to copy and film dangerous behaviors and put the videos online. In April 2010, Canadian researchers reported that there had been a growing number of videos online that showed recreational asphyxiation (Parker-Pope, 2010). In what is also known as the “choking game,” the videos showed teenagers purposely choking themselves to receive a high. Although it is believed that such behavior has been taking place since the 1890s when it was documented in a British medical journal, there are some who are now concerned that the Internet is increasing the popularity of the behavior and bringing it back into fashion. At the time of the Canadian study, there were 65 of these videos that had been viewed 174,000 times (Parker-Pope, 2010). A current YouTube search returned 3,540 videos for the search term “the choking game” with the first video returned showing 479,798 views. In addition, other prompts shown by YouTube as the search term was entered included “the choking game in action,” “the choking game how to play,” and “the choking game video” indicating that there were many more videos of the “choking game” that may have been returned under a different search term. This shows support for suspicions that the Internet is providing a wider audience for those engaging in recreational asphyxiation and showing potential copycats the techniques to carry out the behavior for themselves.

*Fire Tricks*

Some doctors are claiming that due to the ease of documenting their dangerous behaviors for a wider audience than ever before, some adolescents are performing more dangerous stunts. In addition to the “choking game,” some are claiming that fire tricks are being performed with greater frequency due to their desire to film the behaviors. According to Dr. Mansour, medical director of the burn center at St. Barnabas Medical Center in Livingston, New Jersey, “boys have been trying to rocket scientists for many years. But now we’re seeing it in a more brazen way” (as cited in Parker-Pope, 2010). Unlike those of past generations, modern teenagers are performing behaviors involving fires on purpose. One teenage who was treated by burn specialists at the St. Barnabas Medical Center had been burned after filling his family’s bathtub with fireworks, covering himself in protective clothing, and lighting the fireworks while filming the event that resulted in burns over 14 percent of his body. Although most take precautions, such as covering their skin with some form of protection, many are still injured as a result of their antics. In 2010, a 15-year-old was treated at the burn center at St. Barnabas Medical Center for trying to shoot a flaming basketball while filming it. Although he work layer of clothing to protect his skin, he had doused the basketball in gasoline prior to lighting it and his clothing caught on fire. Although he recovered, doctors reported that he would likely have lasting scars from second- and third-degree burns on his chest, abdomen, and thighs as a result of the stunt. At the time of the incident, a YouTube search for “flaming basketball” turned up over 100 videos with the majority of those involving participants who appeared to be between 13 and 20 years old (Parker-Pope, 2010). A current YouTube search found 480 videos for the search term “flaming basketball” with one video showing 4,466 views. This finds support for the view that teenagers are facing greater peer pressure to film and post videos of dangerous stunts on the Internet which is resulting in more dangerous behaviors.

*Ghost Riding the Whip*

Like the “choking game” and fire tricks, the Internet has allowed for the spread of ghost riding to middle-class teenagers in a similar fashion. A fad that became popular in 2006, the spread of ghost riding can be directly tied to the Internet videos that made it popular prior to its viewing on television. It is a behavior that involves exiting a slowly moving vehicle and then performing some kind of movement, usually dancing, on the side or top of the vehicle in an attempt to make it seem as though a ghost is driving the vehicle (Piersa, 2009). Similar to car surfing, ghost riding began in Oakland, California as part of a hip-hop music movement known as Hyphy, which encourages informal public gatherings. While it began in the lower class urban areas of Oakland, it quickly diffused into the surrounding cities. The behavior further diffused into suburban middle-class cities with the assumption being that this diffusion was the direct result of exposure on the Internet rather than via television (Piersa, 2009). A current search of the term “ghost riding” provides 10,700 results with one video receiving 3,410,561 views. The number of videos that portray young white affluent males engaging in ghost riding demonstrates the diffusion of the behavior from Oakland into the suburbs, and the power of the Internet to provide a medium for that diffusion to occur.

*Fire in the Hole*

Not all copycat behaviors involve risks only to those performing the acts, such as those previously mentioned. Fire in the hole refers to a prank in which an individual purchases a drink from a drive thru service window, receives the drink, yells “fire in the hole,” and then throws the drink back at the server before driving away (Know Your Meme, 2011). First introduced as part of the “Camp Kill Yourself Trilogy: Round 1” video series filmed in 1999 by Brandon DiCamillo, the prank began to gain popularity on sites such as YouTube and soon gained media attention in the form of local news. Since the inception of the prank, there have been a number of incidents of criminal justice involvement with those who have carried out the behavior. In Pennsylvania, four 17-year-old boys were taken into custody after they caused an eye injury to an employee after carrying out a fire in the hole prank. In Florida, two teenagers were charged with two counts of battery and one count of criminal mischief after carrying out the stunt. In addition, in California, a 17-year-old was arrested after turning himself in for performing a fire in the hole prank that resulted in second degree burns to an employee (Know Your Meme, 2011). Although this prank seems to have peaked in popularity in 2008, the evidence of its influence still exists in the derivative videos that are now gaining in popularity on social media websites. Rather than restricting the prank the inclusion of drinks, pranksters are now including dishes of food, sauces, and deserts in their copying of fire in the hole.

*Other Food and Drink Challenges*

Popularized by their viewing on the Internet, and the ability to challenge others to complete these dares, fire in the hole is not the only Internet dare that is gaining popularity. Further popularized by television shows, such as Tosh.O on Comedy Central television network, food and drink challenges have gained an immense following on the Internet. Not only does it challenge individuals to perform actions that others failed to complete, it also allows the opportunity to dare others to engage in similar behaviors. A search of the Internet turned up a number of such challenges. One such challenge was the milk chugging challenge in which an individual is dared to drink a gallon of 2% or whole milk within an hour without vomiting (CT.com, n.d.). A current YouTube search for the term “milk challenge” found 16,000 videos with one receiving 813,803 views. Another challenge is the cracker challenge in which an individual attempts to eat six saltine crackers within one minute without drinking any liquids (CT.com, n.d.). A YouTube search for “cracker challenge” found 8.760 videos with one video receiving 154,585 views. Yet another challenge is the cinnamon challenge in which an individual attempts to swallow a tablespoon of cinnamon without the assistance of liquids (CT.com, n.d.). Although it is considered almost impossible, YouTube shows 34,800 videos of people who have tried when the search term “cinnamon challenge” was entered, with the first video listed receiving 12,336,276 views. Another challenge is the bread challenge in which an individual attempts to eat a slice of bread in under 45 seconds without the assistance of liquids (CT.com, n.d.). A current YouTube search for “bread challenge” returned 4,930 videos with one video receiving 14,376 views. A similar challenge is the steak challenge which entails an individual eating an entire pound of steak within 15 minutes (CT.com, n.d.). When the term “steak challenge” is searched for on YouTube, 1,860 results are returned with one video receiving 1,188,447 views. Further challenges include the death by butter challenge in which an individual is dared to eat a stick of butter as fast as possible (CT.com, n.d.). When entering “butter challenge” as a search term in YouTube, 5,090 results were returned with the first video returned receiving 15,879 views. Yet another challenge is known as the centurion power hour challenge in which an individual is dared to drink a 1.5 ounce shot of beer every minute for 100 minutes (CT.com, n.d.). Although the challenge may end with the risk taker in the hospital, 8,750 results were retuned on YouTube for the search term “beer challenge” with one video receiving 164,788 views. Another challenge is the banana-sprite challenge in which the individual attempts to eat two bananas and drink 2 liters of sprite without vomiting (CT.com, n.d.). The search term “banana sprite challenge” returns 850 YouTube, results with one video receiving 141,168 views. Finally, other challenges include the eating or drinking of foods and liquids that most would consider inedible. One again, these food and drink challenges speak to the ability of the Internet to exert peer pressure on users from disparate locations in mass numbers.

*Surprise Trust Falls*

In addition to food and drink challenges, another popular copycat stunt that has emerged, in part as a result of its popularization on the Internet video show Tosh.O, is that of the surprise trust fall. The trust fall is an exercise that is often performed at retreats and is part of many other team building activities requires that one person falls and trusts at least one other person to catch them. A variation on this activity, the surprise trust falls entails an individual walking up to another unsuspecting person, yelling “trust fall,” and expecting that person to catch them (Urban Dictionary, n.d.). When searching YouTube for “surprise trust falls,” 823 results were returned with one video receiving 1,014,767 views. The shows that not only can new media produce copycats, but the interaction between traditional and new media also has the potential to increase exposure and thus the potential for copycats.

*Bum Fights*

As previously mentioned, not all copycats involve only the person performing the stunt, and not all are without criminal nature and intent. Bum fights are one example. While most videos that are posted on the Internet depict young people performing lawful, although usually dangerous, acts, the potential of the Internet to expose acts of violence to thousands of viewers still exists as well. The producers and distributors of “Bum Fights” earn millions of dollars from the proceeds of those wanting to view the homeless performing live and dangerous acts as a form of entertainment (Massey, n.d.). Although these videos were introduced to the west coast in 2001, they were exposed to the world with the introduction of YouTube in 2005. A report from the National Coalition for the Homeless conducted a study in 2006 which found that, in 2005, 86 violent acts were committed against the homeless, 13 of which resulted in death. The trend continued into 2006 with 17 percent of homeless attacks ending in death. Teenagers were those who were charged most with these crimes (Massey, n.d.). This trend has been attributed to the fact that the “Bum Fight” videos, which began in 2001, received increased exposure with the introduction of YouTube, which prompted the increase in copycats. These potential copycats were further compounded by the requests by the producers’ and distributors’ requests for amateur footage. Although the homeless participants were asked to sign a waiver prior to their participation in the videos, those who were involved with the “Bum Fights” series eventually plead guilty to misdemeanor charges of conspiracy to stage illegal fights. Although there is no definitive proof that there is a causal relationships between the popularity of the “Bum Fights” video series and their exposure thanks in part to YouTube, many who are involved in criminal justice find it hard to ignore the possible relationship between this growing exposure and the increased violence against the homeless (Massey, n.d).

*School Shootings*

According to Wong (n.d.), new media has the potential to prevent or facilitate violence in schools, including school shootings. Often, as children reach adolescence, there is little supervision over their use of different forms of social media, which can lead to a number of social problems. It is through this new media that both positive and negative images, role models, and information is relayed to users, and this gives new media the potential to become a substitute caregiver. When this process occurs, adolescents are taught behaviors and given instructions in an indiscriminate fashion, and these may stand in contrast to those of their parents and/or their culture. As children become better acquainted with technology and the Internet at younger ages, the Internet poses the threat of providing children, who are still undergoing the socialization process, with violent ideologies. This hypothesis is supported by the incidences of school shootings that have taken place. It has been found that in many parts of the United States and Canada school shooters reported to the authorities that they had used Internet accounts of what had happened at Columbine High School in Colorado as a model to plan their own attacks (Wong, n.d.). In addition to providing models of behavior for potential copycat criminals, the Internet can be a way for school shooters to find support for their planned behaviors. The Internet also provides exposure of school shootings which has the potential to increase copycats. Wong (n.d.) found that, following the tragedy at Columbine High School copycat crime threats were issued across the Internet, and bomb threats caused thousands of students to miss school in April of 2000 because they feared for their safety (Wong, n.d.). Although school shootings are relatively rare events, copycat crime, via new media sources, has been given as a reason for the spread of this type of violence in recent years. In addition, the fact that school shootings have often been carried out with the end goal of suicide by the perpetrator only adds to the potential copycat effect. The incidence of copycat suicide, also known as the Wether effect, is particularly sensitive to media coverage. The increased coverage of school shootings that is provided by the Internet increases the likelihood that more frustrated students may see school shootings as a method for the commission of suicide with hostile intent (Preti, 2008). Regardless of whether it is the motive, techniques, or some other dimension of the crime that is being considered by potential copycat criminals, it does appear that the Internet does seem to have some relationship to the increase in prevalence of school shootings.

*Terrorism*

A similar potential for the media to increase violence can be seen in acts of terrorism. Some have argued the hypothesis of contagion to explain the media’s impact on copycat crime with respect to terrorism. According to Nacos (2009), contagion, in this context, can be explained as “a form of copycat crime, whereby violence-prone individuals and groups imitate forms of (political) violence attractive to them, based on examples usually popularized by the mass media” (3). There are many examples of terrorist acts that have received a great deal of media attention: the hijackings of commercial airliners in the 1960s and 1970s by Palestinian terrorist groups, the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City by “Unabomber” Timothy McVeigh, and the September 11, 2001 suicide Al-Qaeda hijackings and subsequent intentional crashing of passenger jets into the Twin Towers, the Pentagon, and a field in Pennsylvania, just to name a few. Each of the previous examples of terrorism received a great deal of subsequent media attention. It is through this intense media coverage following a terrorist act that the terrorist groups who carried out the act(s) are able to gain a much wider audience to air their political grievances. As other terrorist groups, with similar aims, likewise begin to see the media as a way to gain attention for their political cause, they are inclined to carry out copycat terrorist acts (Nacos, 2009). One example of this ability is cited by terrorists themselves. Many state that they were motivated to carry out their terrorist activities after those before them were successful in gaining publicity for their actions. It also appears that those acts of terrorism that were successful in receiving media attention tend to be copied in terms of method of attack. This seems to happen in waves, with methods of attack models remaining attractive to copycat criminals until attention is given to improving security in an effort to protect against the specific terrorism method (Nacos, 2009).

Another form of contagion, and the one that has more relevance with regards to copycat terrorism and new media, is inspirational contagion. Rather than adopting a terrorist group’s techniques, terrorist groups may choose to adopt another’s general strategy. According to Nacos (2009), “the Internet has become thee agent of virtual inspirational contagion spread by a multitude of extremist websites with chat rooms and message boards that condition and inspire vulnerable young men and, increasingly, women…to form or join autonomous groups or cells and plot terrorist strikes” (10). This is made even more potent than traditional media by the fact that there are no traditional gatekeepers to monitor content that is dispersed and obtained through new media channels. This gives new media the ability to spread the potential for violence through terrorism further and faster than was previously available through traditional media sources.

*Video Game Reenactments*

Reports of those committing violent, and sometimes deadly, acts that imitate those portrayed in video games are becoming more commonplace in modern society leading many to further speculate on the relationship between new media and copycat crime. Following his arrest for killing three police officers, Devin Moore stated, “Life is like a video game. Everybody’s got to die sometime.” Statements such as these have led to the targeting of video games as crime generators (Surette, 2010). Grand Theft Auto (GTA) III, one of the video games receiving a great deal of attention in the controversy, was released on October 22, 2011. With a storyline depicting a criminal who has escaped law enforcement and commences the commission of criminal acts, each of which are worth points, GTA, and other similar video games, have been blamed for a number of copycats. In the above cited case of Devin Moore, the eighteen year old was arrested when Lafayette police found him sleeping a stolen car. During questioning, Moore grabbed an officer’s gun, shot the officer, shot another officer responding to the sound of shots being fired, shot the dispatcher, and escaped in a police cruiser. Although Moore had no prior criminal history, it was reported that he had purchased GTA as a minor, had played the game over the course of many months, and had played for several hours each day including prior to his stealing of the car (Surette, 2010). Although his defense attorneys argued for a “GTA defense,” that Moore had so lost touch with reality due to his compulsion to play violent video games that he had begun copying the crimes that he had acted out in the video game, Moore was sentenced to death in 2005 (Surette, 2010).

The interactive nature of video games, and the ability to live vicariously through the characters created by the user, provides this form of new media an opportunity to provide an extensive array of criminogenic models. Users are able to find like-minded role models, and are able to interact with them while still remaining anonymous. They are also able to rehearse their criminal acts in a fantasy setting. This may lead to the acquisition of criminogenic scripts. In addition, the narrative involvement in a fantasy setting provides video games the opportunity to influence those who would not normally be prone to traditional criminogenic media content. The “suspension of belief” that is created by the fantasy environment coupled with the ability to act vicariously through a character and escape reality has been argued by some to be a key pathway in the copycat crime process (Surette, 2010).

All of the previously mentioned new media copycats have the potential to lead to copycat crime through communications that are interpersonal in nature and encourage unlawful acts from distances that are geographically disparate. New media users have the ability to find role models with similar mind sets who will interact with them on a personal level, all while maintaining their anonymity. This all leads to a greater potential for copycat crime to occur. The previously mentioned examples of new media copycats further illustrate the ability of new media to exert virtual peer pressure on users. This may lead to pressure to complete, film, and post online stupid, and often dangerous and/or illegal, behavior in an effort to be liked or to gain fame for their behaviors. New media also has the ability to provide more and varied criminal models to a wider audience who may copy the motive and/or techniques that are exhibited. Users have the ability to fantasy role play and to rehearse what they have learned from their criminogenic role models. This exhibits the new media’s potential to increase violence and the prevalence of copycats. New media also provides a medium for a diffusion effect to take place. Further, these examples show the ability of new media to increase the impacts that traditional media have on potential copycat criminals and crime.

**A Reanalysis of Surette’s (2011) Report New Media and Copycat Crime Among Offenders: An Initial Look and Recommendations for Future Research**

*New Media and Copycat Crime Among Offenders: An Initial Look and Recommendations for Future Research (Surette, 2011)*

In a study conducted by Raymond Surette (2011), a sample of 574 typical jail inmates were surveyed. One-third of those sampled were under the age of 27 years and were equally distributed between White and African American inmates, while 15 percent were Hispanic. However, unique to this study of copycat crime was that the sample was one quarter female. Most of those sampled had been in a large county jail facility for an average period of four days or less, but most had extensive criminal histories that were comprised of almost ten prior arrests (only 8 percent reported this being their first arrest). Surveys were distributed amongst those in the sample over a four day period from April 13 through April 16, 2009 with one female and three male dormitories being included in the surveying. These surveys included 118 questions that asked inmates about their opinions, attitudes, free time, criminal history, and demographics. General population inmates were the only individuals included in the sample, with those being a security or high risk inmate and those involved in jail programs, drug and alcohol treatment, GED and general education, and religious based programs being excluded from the sample. Further, trustees, inmate institutional workers, and work release inmates were also included in the study (Surette, 2011).

With their being a proposed relationship between media consumption levels and copycat behavior, Surette’s study placed special emphasis on the respondent’s interaction with the media. Special interests for the current reanalysis include Surette’s examination of new media influence on copycat crime. Looking at the correlation between new media, past copycat behavior, and future copycat crime, Surette offers two measures. The first is an assessment of past copycat behaviors based on a self-report with five indicators: the respondent was looking for a fight after media use, respondent wanted a gun after video media use, respondent wanted a gun after music media use, respondent considered committing a crime based on media content, and respondent attempted a crime based on media content. The second measure was a self report of the respondents’ characterization of their future likelihood of committing a copycat crime given a risk-free scenario.

After conducting bivariate correlations and multivariate analysis, Surette came to a number of conclusions that helped contribute to the current body of literature with regards to the prevalence of copycat crime among offenders. In providing another estimate of this prevalence, Surette also found that copycat crime was more common among male than female offenders (Surette, 2011). He further found age was the only demographic variable that significantly predicted both past and future copycat likelihood with younger offenders being more likely to emulate a crime that they had seen in the media (Surette, 2011). He also found that the media consumption of offenders is not unique from that of non-offenders (Surette, 2011). Further , his study found that all personality and attitude characteristics that were included in the study were important (Surette, 2011). Surette also hypothesized, after conducting this analysis and finidng that new media was significant in both multivariate models, while other indicators appear to be strong predictors of copycat likelihood, measures of new media and involvement with new media persist as important factors as well (Surette, 2011). However, despite Surette’s findings, there as a primary question left unanswered: the causal order of new media. In other words, do preexisting copycat offenders gravitate towards new media due to its nature? Or do inmates gravitate towards copycat crime as a result of their immersion in new media? It is the hope of this reanalysis to shed further light on which indicators seem to be important in the relationship between new media and potential copycat crime.

*Path Analysis Model: A Reanalysis of Surette’s (2011) Report New Media and Copycat Crime Among Offenders: An Initial Look and Recommendations for Future Research*

The current study will seek to formulate a path analysis model identifying potential copycat crime as the endogenous latent construct reflected in three indicators. These indicators include: demographics (indicated by age, race, and gender), personality characteristics (indicated by copycat crime propensity, criminal innovativeness, whether the respondent was seeking fame, whether the respondent was seeking thrills, and whether the respondent followed rules), and copycat crime characteristics (whether their crime was committed alone or in a group, whether the crime involved planning, the type of crime committed, the idea source for the copycat crime, the age at which the respondent attempted a copycat crime, whether the respondent received punishment for their crime, whether the respondent thought about a copycat crime, and if the respondent tried a copycat crime). New media is the exogenous latent construct reflected in three indicators as well: amount of new media exposure (as indicated by the free time a respondent spends playing video games, the amount of free time a respondent spends on the Internet, the number of hours per day that a respondent spends on the Internet, and the number of hours per day that a respondent spends playing video games, no video games, and no Internet), preferred new media content (as indicated by the respondent’s favorite video game, the respondent’s favorite website, the respondent’s interest in crime media, and whether or not the media assisted the respondent with their crime), and self-reported influence (as indicated by whether or not the respondent admired the media, how sure the respondent was that they were self-influenced by video games, whether video games had other influence, whether the Internet has other influence, and whether YouTube has other influence). These indicators, and their own indicators, are all based on relationships that have been hypothesized by previous research.

It is thought that those who are part of certain demographic categories are more likely to copycat. For example, previously cited research has found that those who are young and male are more likely copycats. The personality characteristics of the potential copycat offender are also thought to be an important indicator of copycat criminal potential with those who are criminally innovative, fame seeking, and thrill seeking, and those who have problems following the rules being more likely to become copycat criminals as previously cited by the literature. These personality characteristics may not only be seen as an indicator of copycat crime potential, but also as having a relationship with copycat crime characteristics. These characteristics may also indicate copycat crime potential in that how a crime was planned and carried out, the type of crime that was committed, and from where the idea for the crime originated are all important considerations when looking a copycat crime characteristics and their importance in indicating whether there is more or less potential for a copycat crime to occur.

The amount of exposure to new media has been indicated by the previously cited research as having a relationship to the impacts of new media on copycat crime potential. How much free time and how many hours per day are spent accessing content through new media channels is hypothesized to indicate the amount of exposure with the amount having a relationship to a respondent’s preferred content. Having prolonged new media exposure with criminogenic content is more likely to lead to copycat crime and criminals. Both the amount of exposure and the preferred content reported by the respondents are also seen as being related to the self-reported influence of the media, another indicator of new media that was selected based on previously cited literature.

Using IBM’s SPSS Amos 19 software, measurement models will be formulated in an effort to address a number of questions (IBM, 2010a). These questions will address the validity of the model presented, and whether there is any relationship between new media and the potential for copycat crime. Through the use of the multiple group comparison approach, the validity of the measurement model of work-related perceptions presented, and the relative contribution of each of the determinants. The initial measurement model for the amount of exposure is presented in Figure 1. The chi-square value for this model was 213.1 and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) is 0.429 indicating that this model is not statistically significant at the 0.05 level. It was found that Internet hours per day was the strongest indicator (0.64) followed closely by video game hours per day (0.58). It was also found that free from spent surfing the Internet and free time spent playing video games were both strong negative indicators (both at -0.66). These two indicators were replaced by the indicators no Internet and no video games. This revised measurement model is presented in Figure 1.1. This model had a chi-square value of 136.7 which indicates a better fit for the revised model. However, although the RMSEA was closer to the statistically significant 0.05 level, the value was still only 0.343 indicating that the revised model was still not statistically significant. This revised model did find that video game hours per day (0.70) and Internet hours per day (0.58) were still the most important indicators. No video games (-0.67) and no Internet (-0.53) were found to be negative indicators with regards to the impacts of new media exposure amount on the potential for copycat crime. The initial measurement model for the self-reported influence of new media on copycat crime is presented in Figure 2. The chi-square value for this model was 8.6 while the RMSEA was 0.036 indicating that it was statistically significant at the 0.05 level indicating that this model had a good fit for the data. It was found that other influence from YouTube was the most important indicator (1.00). This was closely followed by other influence from the Internet (0.96) and other influence from video games (0.85). Finally self-influence from video games (0.20) and admiration of the media (0.09) were found to be weak indicators of self-reported influence on new media copycat crime. The initial measurement model for the impact of preferred new media content on copycat crime is presented in Figure 3. The chi-square value for this model was 4.2 while the RMSEA was 0.044 indicating that it was statistically significant at the 0.05 level; thus, this model was a good fit for the data. It was found that interest in crime media was the most important indicator (0.45) followed by media help with crime (0.26). Favorite video game (0.08) and favorite website (0.07) were found to be weak indicators of the impact of preferred new media on copycat crime potential.

The measurement model of the impact of demographics on potential copycat offenders and copycat crime is presented in Figure 4. The chi-square value for this model was 0.0 and the RSMEA was 0.035 indicating that it was statistically significant at the 0.05 level and was a good fit for the data. However, age was the only demographic that was found to have a positive correlation (0.24) with potential copycat crime, while gender (-0.14) and race (-0.47) were found to have negative correlations. The measurement model for the impact of personality characteristics on copycat crime potential is presented in Figure 5. The chi-square value for this model was 7.6 and the RMSEA was 0.030 indicating that the model was a good for the data. It was found that criminal innovativeness was the most important indicator (1.01). This was followed by seeking thrills (0.64) and copycat crime propensity (0.44). This model also found that seeking fame (0.19) and following rules (0.16) were weak indicators of copycat crime potential from the personality characteristics. The measurement model for the impact of copycat crime characteristics on potential copycat crime is presented in Figure 6. The chi-square value for this model was 90.0 and the RMSEA was 0.052 meaning that the model was not statistically significant at the 0.05 level. As can be seen by the model, the age at which a copycat crime was attempted was found to have a value of 0.00. For this reason, it was removed from the model with no impact on the importance of the other indicators. The revised model, seen in Figure 6.1, had a chi-square value of 84.5 indicating that the revised model was a slightly better fit for the data. However, the RMSEA value was 0.059 meaning that it was still not statistically significant at the 0.05 level. It was found that thinking about committing a copycat crime and trying a copycat crime were the most important indicators in this model (0.65 and 0.62 respectively). This was followed by the idea source for the copycat crime (0.36) and whether or not the crime was punished (0.17). All other indicators in this model were negative with these being: acting alone or in a group (-0.54), being involved in a copycat crime that involved a fight (-0.48), being involved in a copycat crime that involved a gun (-0.43), whether the type of crime committed was violent or not (-0.32), and whether the copycat crime was planned (-0.04).

Figure 7 shows the initial path model with all indicators included for both the endogenous and exogenous variables. After performing an analysis of each of the composed measurement models, all indicators that were negative or below 0.20 were removed as indicators of the latent constructs. Figure 8 shows the final measurement model of the impact of new media as a latent construct with only those indicators that were positive and above 0.20 included. In this final measurement model, new media was a latent construct indicated by the amount of new media exposure (video game hours per day and Internet hours per day), self-reported influence from new media (other influence from video games, other influence form the Internet, other influence from YouTube, and admiration of the media), and preferred new media content (interest in criminogenic media and media help with crime). Figure 9 shows the final measurement model for the potential for copycat crime. Potential copycat crime was a latent construct that was designated by the indicators that were not negative and whose values were over 0.20. These included: copycat criminal demographics (age), the personality characteristics of potential copycat criminals (copycat propensity, criminal innovativeness, and seeking thrills), and copycat crime characteristics (copycat crime idea source, having thought about trying a copycat crime, and having actually tried a copycat crime). The two measurement models were then combined to form the final proposed path model of the impact of new media on potential copycat crime and criminals. This proposed model may be found in Figure 10.

**Typology**

The typology presented in Table 1 is based on the previous literature as well as the aforementioned example of new media copycat crime. It is based on two dimensions. The first dimension is based on the number of people impacted by the copycat crime. Some copycat crimes impact only the individual committing the copycat behavior and/or the victim of the copycat crime. These crimes, such as kidnappings and bum fights, fall into the individual level of this dimension. Other copycat crimes tend to impact small groups of individuals. These crimes, such as school shootings and video game reenactments, fall into the aggregate level of this dimension. Finally are crimes that impact and change societies as a whole with very few people not impacted by or exposed to the media coverage related to the copycat crime. These crimes, such as terrorism and workplace violence, fall into the societal level of the dimension. The second dimension of the typology involves the motivations of the copycat criminal, whether the crimes are high profile or low profile. As previously mentioned, high profile copycat crimes are committed with the goal of media exposure in the form of publicity. Examples of these crimes include kidnappings, school shootings, and terrorism. Low profile crimes are committed with the goal of reducing the risk of failure, apprehension, and punishment. These crimes include bum fights, video game reenactments, and workplace violence.

**Conclusions and Suggestions for Future Research**

There are a number of limitations that are associated with the current study. One limitation is the data set itself. The sample of 574 inmates was drawn from a single large county jail facility that was selected in 2009. The use of a single jail facility from which to draw conclusions may limit the generalizability of the results. Further, there was no inclusion of inmates that were a security or high risk inmate and those involved in jail programs, drug and alcohol treatment, GED and general education, and religious based programs, nor was there the inclusion of any prison inmates in the sample. All of these considerations could impact the generalizability of the results to those who fall into these populations as the sample is not entirely representative. Yet another problem is the use of self-report surveys to gain the data used in the analysis. Inmates may lie, have recall problems, or give other subjective responses that may limit the reliability of the respondents’ answers and thus the results. Another issue to be considered is that path analysis is used to conduct the analysis. This form of statistical analysis is limited by the observed variables chosen by the researcher and the structural relationships that are hypothesized.

Path analysis is utilized in statistics as a way to analyze structural relationships between theoretical constructs. In this study, it was utilized to examine the endogenous latent construct, copycat crime, based on copycat criminal demographics (age), the personality characteristics of potential copycat criminals (copycat propensity, criminal innovativeness, and seeking thrills), and copycat crime characteristics (copycat crime idea source, having thought about trying a copycat crime, and having actually tried a copycat crime). The finding that age is an important demographic factor is supportive of Surette’s (2011) research. The finding that copycat propensity (being part of a preexisting criminal population for example), being criminally innovative, and seeking thrills are also important predictors of possible copycat criminals and crime have also found support in research on copycat offender correlations research. Finally, knowing where a copycat idea came from, having an offender who had previously thought about committing a copycat crime and having a copycat criminal who had attempted a copycat crime were also found to be important indicators, and their importance is supported by previous research.

Further, the exogenous latent variable, the impact of new media, was also examined in terms of new media exposure (video game hours per day and Internet hours per day), self-reported influence from new media (other influence from video games, other influence from the Internet, other influence from YouTube, and admiration of the media), and preferred new media content (interest in criminogenic media and media help with crime). The amount of time that is spent interacting with new media has been found in previous research to be important indicators of potential copycat crime (those who have more exposure are thought to be more likely to copy), and this study confirms these findings. This exploratory study also found that other influence from new media, whether that be video games, the Internet, or YouTube, along with admiration of the media is more likely to have the potential to lead to copycats. The fact that there is admitted influence and admiration make it more likely that a new media user will copy the models that they observe through these interactions. Finally, the fact that interest in criminogenic media and feeling as though the media is helpful in crime commission have also found support in previous research as those who are more likely to copycat are thought to have a propensity for criminogenic media.

The measurement models were then combined to form a proposed path model. It is suggested for future research that, since the analysis performed in this study was exploratory in nature, that a confirmatory study be conducted in an effort to verify the final proposed path model and the relationships suggested by the model.

New media has the potential to lead to copycat crime through many of the same processes as traditional media. However, due to its on-demand access, interactive user feedback, and extensive content, new media has even greater potential than traditional media to influence potential copycats. It is also expected that many of the same findings of previous research that examined copycat crime and the media are expected to hold true for new media as well, just in a different and often more impactful manner. These include the characteristics and nature of crime generators and criminogenic models, the nature of subsequent media coverage, social contexts, and the characteristics of the copycat criminal. Future research should look further into this relationships as well as examining the causal order of new media. This research should focus on information about the characteristics of generator crimes and what leads to those crimes being generators. Further research should also examine the demographics of copycat crime, the demographics of copycat criminals, the characteristics of the copycat crime, characteristics of new media based on the media type, and the scope of the new media and its potential reach with regards to copycat crime.

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**Table 1:**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **High Profile** | **Low Profile** |
| **Individual Level** | Kidnappings | Bum Fights |
| **Aggregate Level** | School Shootings | Video Game Reenactments |
| **Societal Level** | Terrorism | Workplace Violence |























