



## Full length article

## Investigating the relationship between social media consumption and fear of crime: A partial analysis of mostly young adults

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## ABSTRACT

Theories of media effects have long established a link between media consumption and fear of crime. To date, prior investigations have almost exclusively focused on traditional types of media content (e.g., television news) or entertainment media (e.g., crime-related shows). However, less is known how social media consumption may influence individuals' levels of fear. Using data collected from a multisite sample of mostly young adults, the present study assesses: (1) the relationship between various types of social media consumption (overall, general news, and crime-related content) and fear of crime and (2) whether these relationships differ based on key audience characteristics. Findings reveal that overall social media consumption is significantly related to fear of crime and this relationship varies by perceptions of safety.

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## 1. Introduction

Individuals' fear of crime and violence is well established in the social science literature. Decades of prior research has linked numerous individual- and neighborhood-level factors to fear of crime, which include, but not limited to, women, non-whites, older individuals, education level, victimization experiences, perceived neighborhood conditions, and community crime rates (Brunton-Smith & Sturgis, 2011; Gainey, Alper, & Chappell, 2011; Hindelang, Gottfredson, & Garofalo, 1978; Liska & Warner, 1991; Ross, 1993; Rountree & Land, 1996; Taylor & Hale, 1986; Wyant, 2008). In addition, the consequences of worrying about criminal victimization are well documented. For example, previous investigations have connected fear of crime to reduced neighborhood cohesion, altered habits such as staying indoors more frequently and withdrawing from social activities, increased target hardening, and impaired physical and psychological health (Britto, Van Slyke, & Francis, 2011; Cobbina, Miller, & Brunson, 2008; Conklin, 1975; Garofalo, 1981; Perkins & Taylor, 1996; Skogan & Maxfield, 1981; Stafford, Chandola, & Marmot, 2007; Warr, 2000).

The fascination with crime and violence among the general public is widespread. Perhaps no bigger explanation for such

interest in crime can be traced to increasing media, entertainment, and news coverage on topics associated with criminal and violent acts (McCall, 2007; Surette, 2007). This is evident today with high profiled events involving individuals such as Philando Castile, Michael Brown, and others, as well as increased news coverage surrounding violence found in communities such as Chicago, IL, and Orlando, FL. Extant research has shown that not only do individuals receive most of their information about crime from media content, but their attitudes and perceptions toward crime are also shaped by what they consume from media (Gross & Aday, 2003; Roberts & Stalans, 1997; Surette, 2007). Early attention on the effects of media consumption and fear of crime can be traced to Gerbner and colleagues' cultivation research on how widespread television broadcasting influenced consumers' attitudes and perceptions about social reality (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner, Gross, Jackson-Beeck, Jeffries-Fox, & Signorielli, 1978; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980). Specifically, the authors were interested in understanding how prolonged exposure to violent and aggressive content on television would cultivate fear and mistrust in audiences—a pattern coined as “Mean World Syndrome.” Presently, much of the available evidence suggests that various types of media and news consumption, such as the frequency of watching television news, listening to the radio, and viewing crime-related entertainment programming, significantly increases citizens' fear of crime (Chiricos, Eschholz, & Gertz, 1997; Dowler, 2003; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2004). In addition, previous

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studies suggest that the media and fear relationship differs based on audience characteristics such as age, race/ethnicity, sex, and prior victimization to name a few (Chiricos, Padgett, & Gertz, 2000; Chiricos et al., 1997; Kort-Butler & Hartshorn, 2011).<sup>1</sup>

While important advancements have been made between the media consumption and fear relationship, notably absent from this area of research is the impact of social media consumption on individuals' fear of crime. This is an oversight in the extant literature given that scholars recently argued the cultivation framework "can be applied to any dominant medium" such as social networking sites (Morgan, Shanahan, & Signorielli, 2014, p. 481). Understanding this gap in the literature is important for several reasons. First, social media platforms have shown a tremendous growth in the number of users since the early 2000s (Perrin, 2015). Although this growth has been observed across all ages, according to recent statistics, younger (ages 18–29) and middle-aged individuals (ages 30–49) are more likely to use social media compared to older adults (ages 50–64 and 65 and older) (Greenwood, Perrin, & Duggan, 2016). Correspondingly, citizens are frequently turning to social media networks to obtain news and other information (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016). In addition, users of social media can disseminate news and information to others, which provides a unique method for how content is shared, consumed, and interpreted. Second, advocates and critics of cultivation argue that research needs to adapt the theory to understand new and important independent variables, or "technologies of message production" (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010, pp. 350–51). Therefore, identifying whether a major form of communication, such as social media, not only has important implications for understanding how the future of cultivation may adjust to contemporary modes of media, but also remains an unidentified source in the construction of social issues such as fear (Roche et al., 2016, p. 233). Third, regardless of official recorded crime levels, individuals who fear criminal victimization surpasses the actual number of crime victims on a yearly basis (Hale, 1996). In fact, public apprehension about crime remains high today. Despite crime statistics, such as the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), illustrating that only a small segment of the population have personal experiences with crime or violence,<sup>2</sup> the 2016 Gallup Poll illustrated that Americans' level of concern about crime is the highest in the past 15 years with approximately 79 percent of adults worrying either "a great deal" or "a fair amount" about crime and violence. Thus, given the unique characteristics of social networking platforms, individuals who are interested in learning more about crime and violence events may turn to—or engage in—conversations and posts on social media more frequently (Weber, 2014). As a result, social media consumption and engagement may also cultivate, or increase, fear among individuals.

In the present study, our aim is to contribute to and expand the existing body of work that focuses on media consumption and fear of crime in two important ways. First, we examine whether social

media consumption is related to individuals' level of fear, controlling for other major forms of media usage (e.g., television news, crime programming, and the Internet), demographics, and correlates of fear. Specifically, we assess the effects of three types of social media exposure on fear: overall consumption, general news consumption, and consumption of news/stories involving crime and violence. Second, we examine whether the relationship between social media exposure and fear of crime is conditioned by a number of well-known audience characteristics—sex, race, residential area, prior victimization, feelings of safety, and perceptions of neighborhood problems—to understand whether the impact of social media consumption on fear of crime is more (or less) prominent among specific subgroups of social media users.

Before presenting the results of the current study, we first present an overview of cultivation theory and the key perspectives in reception research. Next, we discuss the empirical research related to media consumption and fear of crime. From there, we provide information on the unique characteristics of social media.

## 2. Theoretical background

Gerbner and colleagues' cultivation theory investigated how the increasing growth of television viewership affected, or shaped, viewers' conceptions of social reality (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner, 1969; Gerbner et al., 1978). According to their research, the more time spent consuming media (e.g., heavy exposure to television), the greater likelihood users' perceptions of the real world will align with what is depicted in the media (Gerbner et al., 1980; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2004). Despite modest support illustrating that heavy television consumption increases fear of victimization, critics of the theory argued the cultivation framework is limited in scope because it failed to account for the variation in viewers' demographic characteristics and social backgrounds (see Eschholz, 1997; Hirsch, 1980; Hughes, 1980).

Because of these early limitations, scholars began to examine how characteristics, social contexts, and past experiences of media audiences may impact their attitudes and perceptions. Specified broadly as "reception research" or "audience reception theory," there are six key perspectives that are salient in the cultivation process (e.g., media consumption and fear of crime). First, the *mainstreaming* hypothesis illustrates that despite differences in consumers' attitudes and views (e.g., social and/or political), heavy media consumption homogenizes individuals to share similar perspectives (Gerbner et al., 1980; Morgan et al., 2014). Second, the *affinity* hypothesis suggests media effects will be stronger for consumers who share similar characteristics to the victims portrayed in the media (Hirsch, 1980). Third, the *vulnerability* hypothesis argues that media effects will be more responsive among individuals who feel defenseless to criminal victimization (e.g., women and the elderly) (Skogan & Maxfield, 1981). Fourth, the *resonance* hypothesis contends that the combination of media messages and personal (or perceived) experiences may provide a "double dose" to some users and amplify the effect of cultivation (Doob & Macdonald, 1979; Gerbner et al., 1980). Fifth, the *substitution* hypothesis argues that cultivation may be more pronounced among consumers without personal experiences to the messages shown in the media (e.g., non-victims) (Gerbner et al., 1980; Gunter, 1987; Liska & Baccaglioni, 1990). Lastly, a "ceiling effect" may occur for certain subgroups such as women and minorities (Chiricos et al., 1997). For example, Heath and Petraitis (1987) found that media exposure affected fear of crime among males but not females. To explain this divergent finding, the authors suggest that women's fear levels may already be at "maximum level" and additional influences, such as media messages, does not affect this group any further (pp. 120–21).

<sup>1</sup> A host of research on cultivation theory and audience effects (reception research) illustrates that media effects are applicable to various crime- and justice-related outcomes beyond fear of crime. For example, prior efforts have examined the effect of various types media consumption on attitudes and perceptions directed toward punitiveness, criminal justice policy, policing, juvenile crime, drug issues, victim characteristics, school shootings, terrorism, and white-collar crime (see Callanan & Rosenberger 2011; Donley & Gualtieri 2017; Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000; Goidel, Freeman, & Procopio 2006; Menifield, Rose, Homa, & Cunningham 2001; Nellis & Savage, 2012; Nielsen & Bonn 2008; Roche, Pickett, & Gertz, 2016; Slingerland, Copes & Sloan, 2006; Thompson, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> For example, according to the most recent published criminal victimization statistics from 2015, less than one percent (0.98) of all persons age 12 or older experienced a violent victimization, whereas approximately eight percent (7.60) of all households experienced property victimization (Truman & Morgan, 2016).

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