



Criminal behavior and the copycat effect: Literature review and theoretical framework for empirical investigation☆☆☆



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ABSTRACT

The accumulation of anecdotal accounts of copycat crime suggests that popular culture plays an important role in some instances and aspects of criminal behavior. However, there is little empirical research specifically examining the copycat effect on criminal behavior. Questions remain regarding the nature and extent of copycat crime, cultural influences that shape the copycat effect, the role and relevance of popular culture as a motivating factor for criminal behavior, and issues the copycat phenomenon raises for legal determinations of criminal responsibility. This paper reviews the research literature and contemporary case examples of copycat crime with attention to the influence of mass media technology on criminal behavior, the mechanisms of media-mediated crime, and the relevance of understanding the copycat phenomenon for determinations of criminal responsibility in insanity cases. An integrative theoretical model of copycat crime is proposed, a methodological framework for empirically investigating copycat crime is presented, and practical implications for understanding the role of the copycat effect on criminal behavior are discussed.

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"Life is like a video game. Everybody's got to die sometime."

— 18-year-old Devin Moore, to police after he was apprehended for fatally gunning down two police officers and an emergency dispatcher.

In 2003, 18-year-old Devin Moore was arrested for suspicion of auto theft in Fayette, Alabama. Moore, who had no prior criminal history, was cooperative with police when they brought him to police station. Once inside the station and booked, Moore grabbed a .40-caliber Glock automatic from a police officer, shot the officer twice, and then shot and killed a second officer and an emergency dispatcher. After the murders, Moore grabbed police car keys, walked out the front door, and drove off in a police cruiser. All three victims—two officers and a dispatcher were shot in the head and pronounced dead at the scene. Moore was captured shortly after (*"Can a video game lead to murder," March 6, 2005*). Following his capture, Moore told police that he had been playing the video game *Grand Theft Auto (GTA) – Vice City* for hours on end prior to the murders. Later at trial, it was revealed that he was a compulsive violent video game player who suffered from childhood abuse-related post traumatic stress disorder. Moore's defense attorneys argued the "GTA defense"—that he was not guilty by reason of insanity and that he had lost touch with reality and was acting out in real-life the virtual violence in *Grand Theft Auto*. Despite his attorneys' efforts, the GTA defense was unsuccessful and Moore was convicted on August 10, 2005 of capital murder and sentenced to death (Adams, 2005; Ferrell, 1995).

There is a large body of research on the effects of violent media on aggressive behavior that suggests that viewing violent media has an imitative influence on aggressive behavior (Anderson et al., 2003; Lloyd, 2002; Oliver, 2002; Sparks & Sparks, 2002; Surette, 2002, 2013) and the effects of media violence exposure may be underestimated (Gentile & Bushman, 2012). Most people consume violent media every day and do not mimic the violent media images they see. However, anecdotal evidence reveals that, for some individuals, violent media plays a key role in the criminal behavior they engage in (Black, 1991; Coleman, 2004; Surette, 1990, 1998). Exposure to violent media has also been found to contribute to the development of the "mean world syndrome"—a view of the world as more hostile and dangerous than it actually is (Gerbner, 1994), violent masculinity as a cultural norm (Jhally, 1999; Katz, 2006), and even relatively benign forms of news media coverage on firearm legislation has been associated with increased firearm suicides by adolescence (Niederkrötenhaler et al., 2009).

The term "copycat crime" has been used in popular discourse and academic literature to refer to imitative crime influenced by media. Copycat crime is crime inspired by another crime that has been publicized in the news media or fictionally or artistically represented whereby the offender incorporates aspects of the original offense into a new crime (Helfgott, 2008). Research suggests that copycat crime is a common part of offender criminal histories with approximately 25% offenders reporting that media or popular culture played some role in their crimes (Surette, 2002, 2012, 2013). However, researchers have not been able to isolate a single stimulus like playing a violent video game as a causative factor for crime and violence amidst the many influences and risk factors that contribute to criminal behavior and some contend that it is virtually impossible to do so. While continuous playing of a violent video game can be seen as one of many risk factors that shape behavior, millions of people play violent video games and do not "copycat" virtual antisocial behaviors they see on their screens. People are differentially impacted by all sorts of cultural artifacts—books, films, TV shows, commercials, video games, etc.—and many people are positively rather than negatively impacted and alter their behavior in a positive way in response to the media they consume.¹ These issues

make the media and technology-mediated crime difficult to empirically study and causation virtually impossible to establish. Atkinson (1999, 7) suggests that "the precise psychological role media played [in documented media-mediated crimes] is never clear—nor can it be, until we are able to "map a brain like a computer hard drive" (Atkinson, 1999, 7).

We may not yet be able to "map a brain like a computer hard drive," but integrating criminological theory with research in cognitive psychology on the relationship between cognitive scripts and behavior can help explain the process by which chronic exposure to a game like GTA can influence behavior. When an individual engages in criminal (or any) behavior, he/she does so within the framework of a socio-cultural context and a cognitive script that is dictated by and inhabited with whatever populates that context. Cognitive scripts are cultural products—"simple, well-structured sequence of events—in a specified order—that are associated with a highly familiar activity" (Matlin, 2005, p. 275). Once scripts are learned (often on an automatic, non-conscious level), they serve as guides or tools for future behavior, and repeated priming and use of a set of schemas eventually makes them chronically accessible (Anderson et al., 2003). Aspects of events, experiences, and event sequences become the content of a broader cognitive schema that are encoded in memory and that provide the basis for attributions, judgments, and behavioral decisions. People are often influenced as much by artistic, media, and pop cultural representations as they are by personal experiences. What you know comes from, "all the events you didn't witness but believe occurred, all the facts about the world you didn't personally collect but believe to be true, and all the things you believe to exist but haven't personally seen" (Surette, 1998, p. xvi).

An illustrative and recent example of a cultural script that made its way into the fantasy life and violent behavior an extreme fashion is the recent case of Elliot Rodger the perpetrator of the University of California, Santa Barbara mass shooting on May 23, 2014. Rodger killed six university students before committing suicide in a murder rampage. After the incident it was quickly discovered that Rodger had written a 141-page manifesto entitled "My Twisted Life" (Rodger, n.d.) (in which he offered a detailed account of his life in journal-form in subsections from age 0–5 to age 22) and had uploaded multiple videos, including his final video titled "Retribution" to YouTube and Google+ in which he narrated his social isolation, his misfortune at being a 22-year-old virgin, and contempt for "sorority girls" who were "stuck-up blonde sluts" and the "sexually active men" who were able to have sex with them (Helfgott, June 8, 2014). In his final account of his 22nd year and epilogue to his manifesto Rodger concluded:

.... The Day of Retribution is all I have. It is the final solution to all of the injustices of this twisted world. By doing this, I will set right all of the wrongs I've had to face in my sorry excuse of a life.

Every single time I've seen a guy walk around with his beautiful girlfriend, I've always wanted to kill them both in the most painful way possible. They deserve it. They must be punished. The males deserve to be punished for living a better and more pleasurable life than me, and the females deserve to be punished for giving that pleasurable life to those males instead of me. On the Day of Retribution, I will finally be able to punish them ALL.

When I think about the amazing and blissful life I could have lived if only females were sexually attracted to me, my entire being burns with hatred. They denied me a happy life, and in return I will take away all of their lives. It is only fair.

I am not part of the human race. Humanity has rejected me. The females of the human species have never wanted to mate with me, so how could I possibly consider myself part of humanity? Humanity has never accepted me among them, and now I know why. I am more than human. I am superior to them all. I am Elliot Rodger... Magnificent, glorious, supreme, eminent... Divine! I am the closest thing there is to a living god. Humanity is a disgusting, depraved, and evil species. It is my purpose to punish them all. I will purify

¹ For example, after viewing the prosocial film *The Hundred Foot Journey*, in which a young aspiring chef is challenged by a well-to-do French restaurant owner to create an omelette that would show his talents, I found myself the next day showing my daughter how to cook an omelette while I have no history or regular habit of cooking omelettes or giving my cooking lessons.

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