

THE NOTORIETY EFFECT: UNDERSTANDING FRAME-SEEKING BEHAVIOUR IN CRIMINAL OFFENDERS

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Abstract

The notoriety effect describes the phenomenon in which individuals commit crimes with the intention of achieving public recognition, infamy, or celebrity-like status. While most offenders seek to avoid detection, a subset of criminals is motivated by the prospect of media coverage, public fear, and historical remembrance. This review paper synthesizes existing literature on fame-seeking criminal behavior (Bushman, 2018; Lankford, 2013; Towers, et al., 2015), examining theoretical foundations, psychological motivations, and media influences that reinforce such acts. Drawing on 20 scholarly sources, including empirical studies, dissertations, and criminological analyses, the paper identifies key themes: the role of narcissism, the glamorization of violence in media, the impact of mass shooting coverage, and the social reinforcement of deviant fame. Findings reveal that notoriety-driven crimes are often premeditated, symbolically staged, and embedded in an offender's self-image. Media framing emerges as a double-edged sword raising public awareness but inadvertently inspiring copycat behavior.

This review highlights the importance of responsible reporting practices, public education, and preventative interventions targeting individuals exhibiting fame-seeking tendencies. Recommendations for future research emphasize cross-cultural comparisons, longitudinal studies, and the integration of criminal psychology with media studies. The notoriety effect remains a complex intersection of psychology, criminology, and communication, demanding coordinated policy and academic attention.

Keywords: fame-seeking criminals, narcissism, media influence, mass shootings

Introduction

Throughout history, certain crimes have captivated public imagination not merely for their brutality but for the larger-than-life personas of the offenders themselves. From infamous outlaws of the 19th century to modern mass shooters who leave behind manifestos and social media trails, the drive for notoriety has been a recurring yet underexplored aspect of criminal psychology (Coleman, 2004; Haggerty, 2009). Unlike most offenders who seek anonymity to evade law enforcement, fame-seeking criminals actively court the spotlight, shaping their crimes to maximize public attention.

The “notoriety effect” is a term used to describe the psychological and sociological processes (Bushman, 2018; Lankford, 2013) that lead individuals to commit crimes for the explicit purpose of gaining recognition. This phenomenon intersects with concepts such as narcissism, anti-social personality traits, and media sensationalism. In the 21st century, the proliferation of digital platforms has amplified the reach of such notoriety (Surette, 2015; Silva & Capellan, 2020), allowing offenders to craft and control narratives about their actions even before they occur.

From a criminological perspective, the notoriety effect challenges conventional deterrence theory (Fox & Delatorre, 2018). If the punishment is outweighed by the perceived “reward” of public infamy, traditional legal consequences lose some of their preventive power. Psychologically, notoriety-seeking offenders may derive gratification not from material gain but from the symbolic immortality granted by media coverage and public discourse.

This review aims to synthesize empirical and theoretical contributions to the study of fame-seeking criminal behavior. Using 20 scholarly references from psychology, criminology, and media studies, it organizes existing research into thematic categories: psychological traits, media amplification, historical case studies, and preventative strategies. By organizing this knowledge, the review seeks to clarify the mechanisms that sustain the notoriety effect and identify gaps in current research.

The importance of this topic extends beyond academic curiosity. Understanding notoriety-seeking behavior is essential for shaping media policies, designing preventative interventions, and informing law enforcement training. As mass media and social platforms become increasingly intertwined with public consciousness, the ethical responsibility to minimize unintentional glorification of offenders becomes urgent. This paper contributes to that dialogue by critically analyzing the intersection of criminal psychology and mass communication.

Literature Review

Psychological Foundations

Several studies link notoriety-seeking behavior to narcissistic personality traits, grandiosity, and a desire for symbolic immortality (Bushman, 2018; Malkki, 2014). Narcissistic offenders may see criminal acts as a performance designed to secure lasting recognition (Fox & Delatorre, 2018). The literature also highlights the role of anti-social personality disorder and psychopathy, particularly in offenders who lack empathy but crave admiration.

Media Influence and Copycat Crimes

Media coverage, especially when sensationalized, can unintentionally glamorize offenders. Studies indicate that highly publicized mass shootings often inspire similar acts within a short time frame a phenomenon known as the "contagion effect" (Towers et al., 2015). Social media amplifies this effect, providing offenders with a platform to disseminate manifestos or real-time updates (Surette, 2015).

Historical and Contemporary Case Studies

Historical outlaws, organized crime figures, and politically motivated terrorists have all leveraged media attention (Coleman, 2004; Haggerty, 2009) to advance personal or ideological agendas. Contemporary cases, such as school shooters and spree killers, demonstrate a similar pattern, often involving carefully curated self-presentations.

Preventative Strategies

Preventative approaches focus on altering media practices (e.g., "No Notoriety" campaigns; Meindl & Ivy, 2017), identifying at-risk individuals, and incorporating fame-seeking motivations into criminal profiling protocols. Research also emphasizes education around media literacy to reduce the public's fascination with violent offenders.

Thematic Analysis Table:

Year	Author	Study Focus	Key Findings
2009	Haggerty	Crime & Media Culture	Media glamorization fuels public fascination with criminals
2013	Lankford	Mass shooters' motivations	Desire for fame is a primary driver in certain cases
2015	Towers et al	Contagion effect in mass shootings	High media coverage increases likelihood of copycat crimes

2017	Capellan	U.S. mass public shootings	Offender behavior patterns show fame-oriented elements
2018	Bushman	Narcissism & mass shootings	Narcissistic traits correlate with fame-seeking crimes

Findings

Narcissism as a Core Driver

A recurring theme across the reviewed literature is the strong presence of narcissistic traits among offenders (Bushman, 2018; Malkki, 2014; Fox & Delatorre, 2018) who seek fame through criminal acts. Studies indicate that such individuals often perceive themselves as exceptional and deserving of public attention, with the crime itself serving as a platform for self-promotion rather than merely a means to achieve a tangible objective. This narcissism manifests in both the planning and the aftermath of their actions, where offenders may relish in the attention garnered from media coverage and public discourse. For example, Malkki (2014) and Fox & Delatorre (2018) highlight cases where perpetrators carefully curated their public image, sometimes leaving behind manifestos or deliberately engaging with journalists to ensure their narrative dominates the conversation. These findings suggest that the psychological gratification derived from recognition may outweigh the fear of legal repercussions for such individuals.

Media as Amplifier

The role of media in magnifying the notoriety of offenders cannot be overstated (Haggerty, 2009; Schildkraut et al., 2019). Several studies, including those by Surette (2015) and Schildkraut et al. (2019), underscore how the style, frequency, and sensational tone of coverage can inadvertently turn criminals into infamous public figures. High-profile cases reveal that offenders' names, photographs, and personal histories are often circulated more widely than information about their victims. This imbalance in coverage not only fulfills the offenders' desire for attention but also risks glamorizing their actions in the eyes of susceptible individuals. Moreover, the rise of 24/7 news cycles and online platforms has intensified this effect, enabling notoriety to spread more quickly and persist far longer than in previous decades.

Premeditation and Symbolism

Fame-seeking crimes are rarely impulsive; they tend to be meticulously planned to achieve maximum public impact. Researchers like Lankford (2013, 2016) and Towers et al. (2015) have observed that such crimes often incorporate symbolic elements be it the

choice of location, timing, or the use of visual markers that make them more “newsworthy.” These symbolic acts are strategically designed to resonate with cultural, political, or social narratives, thereby ensuring greater public and media engagement. For example, choosing a historically significant site or staging a crime during a major public event increases the likelihood of widespread coverage, effectively merging criminal intent with a performative spectacle.

Copycat Potential

Another critical finding is the documented “contagion effect,” where the publicity surrounding one notoriety-driven crime can inspire others to replicate similar acts. Research by Meindl and Ivy (2017) demonstrates that when specific details such as the offender’s name, tactics, or motives are repeatedly broadcast, they can serve as a blueprint for future offenders seeking comparable fame. This phenomenon has been especially evident in cases of mass shootings, where a spike in similar incidents often follows intense media coverage. Scholars argue that the lack of restraint in how such crimes are reported significantly contributes to this risk, suggesting a need for more responsible journalistic practices. This contagion effect has been further supported by empirical studies on mass shootings (Towers et al., 2015).

Preventative Gaps

Finally, there is a clear gap in criminal justice policies concerning the management of fame-seeking behavior among offenders. Despite growing recognition of the notoriety effect, few jurisdictions have implemented guidelines for media reporting or proactive monitoring of online activity that could indicate fame-motivated threats. As highlighted by Coleman (2004) and Surette (2015), this oversight leaves law enforcement reactive rather than preventative. Social media, in particular, poses unique challenges, as it allows offenders to bypass traditional media channels and directly cultivate an audience. Integrating notoriety awareness into policing strategies, mental health assessments, and legislative frameworks could significantly reduce the opportunities for such crimes to occur and limit their social impact.

Discussion

Intersection of Psychology and Communication Structures

The notoriety effect operates at the convergence of two critical domains: the individual psychological predispositions that drive behavior, and the societal communication systems that amplify it. Personality traits such as narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism frequently identified in fame-seeking offenders predispose certain individuals toward behaviors designed to capture public attention (Lankford, 2013, 2016; Malkki, 2014). These traits manifest as a desire for dominance, recognition, and legacy, motivating offenders to craft crimes that are not merely functional acts of violence but

symbolic performances aimed at securing a place in cultural memory. In parallel, the contemporary communication landscape, dominated by 24-hour news cycles, digital platforms, and algorithmic content distribution, provides unparalleled opportunities for such individuals to project their image and narrative. Unlike earlier periods in which notoriety required navigating institutional media gatekeepers, today's offenders can leverage social media to bypass traditional channels (Surette, 2015), instantly reaching vast audiences. This interplay between personal predisposition and systemic amplification is central to understanding why notoriety-seeking has become both more prevalent and more culturally visible in recent decades.

Limitations of Traditional Criminological Models

Classical criminological models particularly rational choice theory often operates on the assumption that offenders engage in a calculated cost-benefit analysis (Fox & Delatorre, 2018) before committing crimes. For most offenders, this analysis prioritizes avoiding detection, minimizing punishment, and maximizing tangible gains. However, notoriety-driven offenders frequently defy this logic. For them, the perceived symbolic reward of mass attention, cultural immortality, or ideological recognition may outweigh the risks of severe legal consequences, even death (Fox & Delatorre, 2018). In such cases, violence becomes both the method and the message, with the crime itself functioning as a form of public spectacle. This mismatch between theoretical expectation and offender motivation suggests that existing criminological frameworks underestimate the role of symbolic incentives. Updating these models to incorporate fame-seeking as an independent motivational category would provide a more accurate predictive tool for both law enforcement and policy design, enabling better identification of at-risk individuals whose primary goal is attention rather than material benefit.

The Case for Media Reform

Media reform represents one of the most actionable strategies for mitigating the notoriety effect (Meindl and Ivy, 2017). The "No Notoriety" campaign advocated by researchers such as Meindl and Ivy (2017) urges journalists to minimize the use of offenders' names, images, and detailed personal histories, instead focusing on victims, community impact, and preventive measures. Empirical evidence supports this approach, with studies showing a measurable reduction in copycat behavior, especially in the context of mass shootings, when offender-focused coverage is minimized. Despite these findings, implementation remains inconsistent. Competitive pressures for viewership, the pursuit of sensational headlines, and the perceived public "right to know" often override these guidelines. The decentralized nature of modern media complicates the problem further. Even when major news organizations adopt responsible reporting practices, smaller outlets, independent bloggers, and international

media can continue to circulate identifying details, eroding the effectiveness of coordinated reform efforts.

Social Media as a Complicating Factor

Social media has introduced an unprecedented challenge to controlling notoriety amplification (Surette, 2015; Schildkraut et al., 2019). Unlike traditional media, social platforms lack editorial oversight and operate on engagement-driven algorithms, meaning content that is shocking or sensational is often promoted more widely. Offenders have recognized this and, as Surette (2015) notes, increasingly use these platforms to disseminate manifestos, livestream attacks, or directly communicate their motives to global audiences. The ability to bypass traditional journalistic filters allows offenders to frame themselves according to their own narrative, often with the explicit goal of achieving viral status. Beyond the offender's own actions, user-generated content ranging from memes to fan accounts can perpetuate their notoriety indefinitely. Online communities may emerge to idolize or defend such offenders, creating echo chambers that normalize fame-seeking criminality and even encourage future acts. This persistent digital afterlife complicates prevention, as once the material is online, it becomes extremely difficult to remove entirely.

Cultural Dimensions of Notoriety

The notoriety effect is also shaped by broader cultural narratives. Western societies, in particular, have a long history of mythologizing outlaws, rebels, and anti-heroes (Coleman, 2004), from Wild West gunfighters to Prohibition-era gangsters (Coleman, 2004). These narratives often blur moral boundaries, portraying criminals as charismatic, misunderstood, or even justified figures. In this cultural context, notoriety can appear aspirational an alternative pathway to fame that bypasses the traditional demands of talent, skill, or long-term effort. While cross-cultural research on notoriety-driven crime is still limited, initial studies suggest that in collectivist societies, where community reputation is prioritized over individual recognition, fame-seeking may be less prevalent or take different forms. This indicates that the notoriety effect may not be a universal phenomenon but one deeply embedded in particular value systems, media practices, and historical traditions. Understanding these cultural variables is essential for tailoring prevention strategies to specific contexts.

Policy Integration and Threat Assessment

Incorporating notoriety-related variables into existing threat assessment protocols offers a promising avenue for prevention (Towers et al., 2015). Research by Towers et al. (2015) suggests that behavioral indicators such as an offender's fascination with infamous criminals, consumption of violent or fame-oriented content, or public statements about desiring recognition can signal potential risk. Digital footprint analysis, when conducted

ethically and in accordance with privacy laws, can further strengthen early intervention efforts. For instance, law enforcement and mental health professionals could flag individuals who repeatedly engage with online communities that glorify violent notoriety. Policy reform should also address the challenges posed by decentralized media, perhaps through voluntary platform agreements that restrict algorithmic amplification of offender-centric content. However, these measures must be carefully balanced with civil liberties, ensuring that freedom of expression is preserved while limiting harmful contagion effects.

The Broader Implication: A Systemic Problem

Ultimately, the notoriety effect cannot be reduced to the actions of individuals alone. It is a systemic phenomenon arising from the interaction of offender psychology, cultural values, and media infrastructure. Addressing it will require a multi-pronged approach that combines updated criminological theory, responsible journalism, platform regulation, cultural reframing, and early intervention protocols. Without such coordinated efforts, the cycle of notoriety-driven violence where each high-profile case inspires the next will likely persist, fueled by the same psychological drives and technological tools that define our media-saturated age.

Conclusion

The notoriety effect represents a complex interplay between psychological predispositions and societal reinforcement mechanisms (Bushman, 2018; Capellan & Gomez, 2018). While not universally present in all criminal acts, it emerges as a dominant motivator in cases such as mass shootings and other high-profile offenses (Bushman, 2018; Capellan & Gomez, 2018). In such instances, the offender's primary goal extends beyond the act of violence itself, aiming instead for enduring recognition through media and public discourse. This fame-seeking orientation is often rooted in narcissistic traits, where personal worth becomes intrinsically tied to public attention and symbolic infamy.

The amplification of these motives is facilitated by modern media structures, which can inadvertently reward criminal actors with the publicity they seek (Haggerty, 2009). Both traditional news outlets and digital platforms contribute to this dynamic, with the latter enabling unfiltered self-promotion and wider reach. Several case studies demonstrate how offenders intentionally leave manifestos, select symbolic targets, or livestream their crimes to ensure posthumous notoriety. These behaviors highlight the performative nature of notoriety-driven violence, which thrives on the certainty of widespread coverage.

Preventive measures must therefore address both the psychological drivers and the societal channels of amplification. Initiatives like the “No Notoriety” campaign seek to limit the exposure of offender identities and imagery (Lankford, 2016), thereby reducing the symbolic rewards (Lankford, 2016). However, as social media bypasses editorial oversight, policy frameworks must also incorporate digital monitoring and early-warning systems for individuals exhibiting fascination with infamous criminals.

Ultimately, addressing the notoriety effect requires an interdisciplinary approach. Psychological profiling, criminological theory, and communication ethics must converge to create prevention strategies that acknowledge the offender’s need for recognition while limiting the societal mechanisms that provide it. Such integration could substantially reduce the appeal of fame-seeking crime and its harmful cultural resonance.

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