Do the Media Unintentionally Make Mass Killers into Celebrities? An Assessment of Free Advertising and Earned Media Value

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Citation of published version:

Lankford, A. (2018). Do the media unintentionally make mass killers into celebrities? An assessment of free advertising and earned media value. *Celebrity Studies, 9*(3), 340-354. https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2017.1422984

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Abstract

In recent years, some critics have suggested that the media make mass killers into celebrities by giving them too much attention. However, whether the media coverage these offenders get actually approaches the amounts given to celebrities has never been tested. This study compared perpetrators of seven mass killings from 2013-2017 with more than 600 celebrities over the same time period. Findings indicate that the mass killers received approximately $75 million in media coverage value, and that for extended periods following their attacks, they got more than professional athletes and only slightly less than TV and film stars. In addition, during their attack months, some mass killers received more highly valued coverage than some of the most famous American celebrities, including Kim Kardashian, Brad Pitt, Tom Cruise, Johnny Depp, and Jennifer Aniston. Finally, most mass killers got more coverage from newspapers and broadcast/cable news than the public interest they generated through online searches and Twitter seems to warrant. Unfortunately, this media attention constitutes free advertising for mass killers that may increase the likelihood of copycats.

Keywords: Mass Shooters; Media Coverage; Celebrity Culture; Fame; Advertising.

Introduction

For a growing number of people, the American Dream seems rooted in the prospect that anyone can become a celebrity (Pinsky & Young, 2008; Sternheimer, 2011). Even a decade ago, Pew Research Center surveys found that 51% of Americans aged 18-25 said that "to be famous" was one of their generation's most important goals in life (Pew Research Center, 2007). Since then, these cultural goals appear to have only grown more widespread (Barna, 2010; Twenge 2014). Many young Americans believe they are destined to become famous celebrities, such as Hollywood actors, television stars, or superstar athletes (Pinsky & Young, 2008; Sternheimer, 2011; Twenge, 2014).

The most common type of attention these people seek is "earned media." In essence, their goal is to do something so outstanding and newsworthy that the media will have to respond by giving them lots of free attention (Sternheimer, 2011). On an individual level, it is at least possible for earned media from major accomplishments to become free advertising for your own celebrity brand. In theory, this would not only satisfy personal desires for fame, but it

could also raise your name recognition to such a high profile that you gain a collection of adoring fans.

However, the vast majority of people with such dreams will eventually see them clash with reality, because getting lots of free media attention is not easy. In fact, even accomplishing something extremely impressive that gets widely covered by the media is no guarantee to make you a celebrity. For example, few readers would recognize the names of David Thouless, Duncan Haldane, or J. Michael Kosterlitz, even though they won the Nobel Prize for Physics in 2016. Similarly, Daniel Berehulak is hardly a household name, even though he is a two-time Pulitzer Prize winner (2015, 2017) for photography and regular contributor to *The New York Times*. In comparative terms, Berehulak has approximately 8,000 Twitter followers, while Kim Kardashian has more than 51 million. So at least by this measure, Kardashian may be more than six thousand times more famous than Berehulak, despite the latter's skills and accomplishments.

Unfortunately, there seems to be a well established shortcut to de facto celebrity status: commit a public mass killing. Such crimes stand out because unlike many other homicides, they occur in public places, they typically involve random innocent victims, and they lead to the deaths of at least three or four victims in a single incident (Fox & Levin, 2015). Committing a high profile public mass killing appears to be the only guaranteed way for an average person to instantly become famous—and many past offenders have not only recognized this, but they have also specifically cited fame-seeking as one of their motives for killing (Bushman, 2017; Langman, 2017a; Lankford, 2013, 2016). The fact that these offenders often die during their attacks does not detract from their desire for post-mortem fame (Bushman, 2017; Langman, 2017a; Lankford, 2013, 2016). Although they may have been overlooked during their lives, they want powerful legacies after their deaths (Newman, 2007). Some also want to influence followers, and the free advertising they receive from the media makes this possible (Helfgott, 2015; Langman, 2017b; Lankford, 2016). Even mass killers who are inspired by ideological causes often want attention and fame. The desire for media attention has long been cited as a key motive for terrorist behavior (Weimann & Winn, 1994; Wilkinson, 1997), and prior research indicates that many attackers on suicide missions have been pursuing a "quest for personal significance" (Kruglanksi et al., 2009; Lankford, 2013).

Skeptics may wonder whether the earned media and free advertising that mass killers receive is actually comparable to the amounts received by high profile celebrities, or whether such claims are mostly hyperbole. This has never been tested. To find out, the present study will compare perpetrators of seven mass killings from 2013-2017 with more than 600 movie and television stars and professional athletes over the same time period. In addition, comparisons will be drawn between the earned media coverage of mass killers from traditional media sources, such as newspapers and broadcast and cable news, with the public interest these offenders receive through online searches and Twitter. Further implications for future mass killings and copycat behavior will also be discussed.

The Value of Earned Media

Marketing efforts often rely on several forms of advertising, including "paid" and "earned." Paid advertising includes newspaper, television, radio, and internet advertisements

that are bought specifically for that purpose and crafted by the company itself (Stephen & Galak, 2012). Earned media is the free advertising and publicity that results from media coverage and public discussion of a product, experience, or person (Stephen & Galak, 2012).

Although both types can be beneficial, the free advertising that comes from earned media has certain advantages. Paid advertisements involve a company or organization essentially asking the public to "pay attention to us because what we're selling is important." However, many consumers recognize that these claims are often self-serving and thus less credible, because they come from the seller itself (Bao & Chang, 2014; Ogilvy, 2015, Risi, 2015). By contrast, when a product, experience, or person receives free advertising from media coverage, it comes with an implicit or explicit assertion that the subject plays a significant role in current events, because it has been mentioned in the news story. Additionally, earned media is often more credible because it comes from a third party (Bao & Chang, 2014; Ogilvy, 2015, Risi, 2015).

Notably, although everyone would prefer to receive public praise, even negative publicity can increase name recognition, brand value, and influence (Ahluwalia et al., 2000; Berger et al., 2010; Ridout & Smith, 2008). For instance, when McDonald's was famously sued for serving coffee that was too hot, that was not a positive news story for the fast-food restaurant. However, in retrospect, the post-appeal final verdict of $640,000 may have been tiny in comparison to the value of earned media for the McDonald's brand, due to the lawsuit. This was free advertising that competitors like Burger King and Wendy's did not receive. Moreover, it does not appear that consumers stopped going to McDonald's during that period, and the company's revenue actually grew (McDonald's Corp, 2017).

As another example, during the 2016 presidential election, Donald Trump received approximately three times as much free advertising as opponent Hillary Clinton (Schroeder, 2016). Even though much of the attention Trump received was negative, his sheer amount of earned media more than offset Clinton's spending advantage in paid advertising, and seemed to contribute to his eventual victory (Oates & Moe, 2016; Stewart, 2016). As Trump himself told *The New York Times*, "I've gotten so much free advertising, it's like nothing I'd have expected...When you look at cable television, a lot of the programs are 100% Trump, so why would you need more Trump during the commercial breaks" (Schroeder, 2016).

Both of these examples are consistent with a great deal of prior research which shows that one of the media's main functions is to be an agenda-setter. In many cases, the media have limited control over what people think *of* a product, experience, or person—whether they find it likeable or unlikeable, attractive or unattractive (Cohen, 1963; Lippmann, 1922; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). However, the media have more ability to set the agenda and directly influence what people think *about* (Cohen, 1963; Lippmann, 1922; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In the aforementioned cases, the free advertising that Trump and McDonald's received may have led to more people thinking about these subjects in both expected and unexpected ways. For example, in addition to the consumers who heard about the McDonald's lawsuit and thought about the legal case, there may have been others who heard about the lawsuit and then decided they wanted a cheeseburger for lunch. Similarly, for some very small fraction of the news audience with severe masochistic tendencies, after hearing about the case, the idea of intentionally burning oneself with coffee may have suddenly sounded intriguing.

Free Advertising for Mass Killings and Mass Killers

Unfortunately, similar effects may stem from the free advertising that mass killings and mass killers receive. When these incidents get tremendous amounts of media attention, the "experience" of committing one of these attacks may be unintentionally advertised to the very small market of at-risk individuals who would find these crimes intriguing. As Newman (2007) explains, many rampage shooters are young men "searching for a way to retire their public image as dweebs and misfits" and hoping to exchange it "for something more alluring: the dangerous, violent man" (p. 29). For some of these individuals, the idea of committing a mass killing may seem like the best solution to their problems: they believe it will be exciting and empowering, and may be their best chance to do something that makes everyone pay attention (Helfgott, 2015; Langman, 2017b; Lankford & Hakim, 2011; Lankford, 2016; Larkin, 2009; Levin & Madfis, 2009; Newman et al., 2004). If they had never been exposed to new stories about previous mass killings, they might not have realized that such horrible crimes even exist, much less conceived of committing one themselves. In turn, for those who were already well aware that mass killings occur, news of a recent incident can serve as a reminder that this experience may appeal to them.

Additionally, beyond free advertising for the experience of mass killing, the earned media attention that mass killers receive as de facto celebrities may increase the likelihood that some at-risk individuals idolize them and wish to follow their path. Some past offenders have explicitly acknowledged this potential influence on others. For example, one of the Columbine school shooters accurately predicted, "I know we're gonna have followers," and the Sandy Hook Elementary school shooter posted online, "just look at how many fans you can find for all different types of mass murderers" (Lankford, 2016, p. 126). Regrettably, after their own high profile attacks, both were cited by subsequent copycat offenders (Follman & Andrews, 2015; Langman, 2017b).

In an open society, it may be inevitable that mass killings—as incidents and experiences—receive earned media that constitutes free advertising. After all, these are important events for the media to cover. Totalitarian governments with state-run media could refuse to report these crimes at all, and thus limit public awareness that such horrible behaviors occur. However, that complete lack of transparency and freedom of information would come with other major costs, and would not be acceptable in a democratic society.

At the same time, it is not inevitable that mass killers as individuals must continue to receive free advertising. This can be stopped. There appears to be growing support for several public campaigns that encourage media organizations to avoid giving these offenders the attention and fame they often seek (Baddour, 2015; Lankford & Madfis, 2017; Stelter, 2015). In particular, Lankford and Madfis (2017) argue that the media should stop publishing the names and photos of mass shooters (except during ongoing searches for escaped suspects), but continue reporting the other important details about these crimes. They suggest that by not rewarding these offenders with fame and not making them into virtual celebrities, the media could deter some future fame-seekers from attacking, reduce competition to maximize victim fatalities, and reduce contagion and copycat effects (Lankford & Madfis, 2017).

Methodology

Data

For the present study, data on earned media were obtained directly from the chief analytics officer at mediaQuant, an independent company that tracks and indexes media coverage of more than 4,000 entities, including business and consumer trends, product brands, political figures, and celebrities. In recent years, mediaQuant data have been cited by many reputable sources, including scholars and social scientists (Grusin, 2017; Oates & Moe, 2016; Slaughter, 2016), The Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press (Murgia, 2016), and media companies themselves, such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Time Magazine*, and *Marketwatch*.

MediaQuant collects data on global, national, and regional earned media coverage from more than 100,000 English language sources, including newspapers, broadcast and cable news, online news, blogs, consumer media, and industry specific media. It then uses these data to calculate both media coverage values in U.S. dollars and media ratings on a comparative 0-100 point scale. These calculations are made by applying weights for the value of coverage at different levels of prominence, advertising rates, and effective reach to the quantity of media mentions from those different sources (mediaQuant, 2017). For example, being mentioned by a top newspaper might be weighed differently than being mentioned by broadcast or cable news, which might be weighed differently from being mentioned in online news, and so on. It must be emphasized that these variables are not based on the total amount of media coverage of all events or news items connected to an individual, but only on the media mentions of the individual's name. For instance, media coverage of a movie, television show, or professional sports event that did not directly mention an actor's or athlete's name would not be counted, nor would media coverage of a mass killing that did not directly mention the mass killer.

MediaQuant assigns the weights, applies them to all trends, products, people, organizations, and other entities within their database, and then calculates media coverage values and media ratings on a monthly basis (mediaQuant, 2017). Because they apply the same methodology to measuring and indexing earned media coverage for all topics, that makes consistent and accurate quantitative comparisons possible across categories of entities (e.g., celebrities, politicians, etc.) and types of media coverage (e.g., newspapers, broadcast and cable news, etc.).

For this study, the mediaQuant chief analytics officer and chief operating officer agreed to code the names of selected mass killers into their system and gather data on the media coverage each offender received. Offenders from seven mass killings that occurred from 2013-2016 were selected. These offenders were: (1) the younger Boston Marathon bomber who attacked on April 15, 2013; (2) the Santa Barbara killer who attacked on May 23, 2014; (3) the Charleston church shooter who attacked on June 17, 2015; (4) the Umpqua Community College shooter who attacked on October 1, 2015; (5) the San Bernardino shooters who attacked on December 2, 2015; (6) the Orlando nightclub shooter who attacked on June 12, 2016; and (7) the Nice, France truck attacker who attacked on July 14, 2016.

These offenders were chosen for several reasons (see Table 1). First, mediaQuant's data were available for a 49 month time frame from March 1, 2013 to March 31, 2017, and the

selected mass killers all attacked during this period. Although it would be possible to include offenders from before this period, those data would not include the offenders' month of attack. Second, the selected offenders all committed mass killings with high or extremely high victim counts, even relative to other mass shooting and mass murder incidents (Duwe, 2007; Hilal et al., 2014; Lankford, 2015; Lester et al., 2004). This study included four of the five deadliest public mass shootings in the United States and one of the deadliest international public mass killings during this time span (Berkowitz et al., 2017). As a result, its findings may be particularly applicable to discussions about the deadliest crimes. Third, many of the selected offenders have been specifically cited in public and scholarly debates about media coverage of mass killers. For example, *Rolling Stone* magazine's portrayal of the younger Boston bomber was widely criticized for treating him like a celebrity (Lankford & Madfis, 2017). In three of the other cases selected for this study, there was direct evidence that the offender sought fame or attention: he either admitted wanting it or directly contacted the media to get it (Lankford, 2016; Lankford & Madfis, 2017). Finally, in at least one additional selected case, there was indirect evidence of fame-seeking: the offender took a series of photos of himself, and then posted the photos and his manifesto online prior to his attack (Robles, 2015).

Table 1. Rationale for Selected Mass Killers

Attack Month	Mass killer	Victim count	Rationale
April 2013	Boston bomber (younger brother)	5 killed*, 280 wounded	Extremely high victim count; *Rolling Stone* magazine's portrayal of the offender as de facto celebrity sparked public outrage
May 2014	Santa Barbara attacker	6 killed, 14 wounded	High victim count; direct evidence that offender sought fame/attention
June 2015	Charleston church shooter	9 killed, 1 wounded	High victim count; indirect evidence that offender sought fame/attention
Oct. 2015	Umpqua Comm. College shooter	9 killed, 7-9 wounded	High victim count; direct evidence that offender sought fame/attention
Dec. 2015	San Bernardino shooters	14 killed, 24 wounded	High victim count
June 2016	Orlando nightclub shooter	49 killed, 53 wounded	Extremely high victim count; direct evidence that offender sought fame/attention
July 2016	Nice, France truck attacker	86 killed, 434 wounded	Extremely high victim count; comparative case from outside of the United States

Note: mediaQuant's (2017) data were available from March 1, 2017-March 31, 2017; all mass killings listed above occurred during this time frame.
*Three victims were killed in the initial attack; two other victims were killed/fatally wounded three days later.

For comparative purposes, mediaQuant also shared data on 606 celebrities whom were already coded into their system: 350 television and film artists and entertainers and 256 professional athletes from the National Football League (NFL), National Basketball Association (NBA), and Major League Baseball (MLB). Because there are approximately 22,000 television and film actors and approximately 10,000 professional athletes in the United States (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016a,b), the studied celebrities represent the top 2-3% of their respective professions, and stand out because they are particularly famous. This focus seems reasonable, given that comparisons will be made with particularly high profile mass killers.

Variable Description

The present study based its analysis on two primary variables that were provided by mediaQuant: (1) earned media coverage value (in U.S. dollars) and (2) media rating (on a comparative scale from 0-100) for each individual, for each month. No adjustments or alterations were made to these variables or the data they contained.

From that starting point, several additional measures were calculated based on the entire study period of March 1, 2013 to March 31, 2017. First, for the three "celebrity" categories of mass killers, television/film artists and entertainers, and professional athletes, the total media coverage value was calculated. Second, for each category, the mean and median coverage values per individual were calculated. Third, for each category, the mean and median coverage values per individual, per relevant month, were calculated. "Relevant months" included the entire time period for the television/film artists and entertainers and the professional athletes, but only the post-attack months for the mass killers. This helps account for the fact that none of the mass killers were famous prior to their attacks. For example, the Orlando nightclub shooter attacked on June 12, 2016, so the media covered him for 9.63 relevant months during the study period: 19/30 days in June 2016, plus nine full months from July 2016 to March 2017.

In addition, for each attack month, the media coverage value received by the relevant mass killer (i.e., the attacker who struck that month) was compared with the media coverage values received by the television/film artists and entertainers and professional athletes that same month. These data were then used to determine (1) how highly the mass killer would rank among the celebrities, and (2) which specific celebrities were most closely comparable to the mass killer. For these comparisons, media coverage values in real numbers were used: no adjustments were made for mass killers' attacks occurring part way through a given month. Although this puts the mass killers at a "disadvantage" when compared to other celebrities who received coverage for the entire month, it also preserves the clarity with which findings can be interpreted. For example, if the data show that during an attack month, mass killer X received more media coverage value than movie star Y or professional athlete Z, that finding can be interpreted at face value.

Finally, comparisons were made between the traditional media coverage, online search interest, and Twitter interest that each mass killer received during his or her attack month. Because mediaQuant calculates monthly media ratings on a comparative scale from 0-100 for each type of media coverage or public interest received, this comparison was straightforward. Traditional media coverage included the average from mediaQuant's categories of worldwide

newspapers, top 50 U.S. newspapers, television broadcast and cable news, and other regional media in North America, Europe, and Asia. Online search interest and Twitter interest were pre-existing mediaQuant categories.

Limitations

The present study has several limitations. First, it should be emphasized that the media coverage values for each mass killers' specific attack month were likely underestimated. This is because media outlets sometimes update previously published articles about mass killings with breaking news about the latest offender. As a result, some media coverage of mass killers is actually time-stamped before the attack month in which the incident occurred. However, in order to ensure that the same methodology was applied to all mass killers and celebrities in this study, no adjustments for the attack month comparisons were made.

Another limitation is that this study did not select a random sample of mass killers, so its findings may not be generalizable to all offenders of this type. There are likely both offenders who received less media attention than those in this study, and offenders who received more. For instance, Duwe (2004) found that some mass killings are not even covered by *The New York Times*. At the other extreme, in the United States, the 1999 Columbine shooting was reportedly the second-most media covered event of that decade—behind only the O.J. Simpson car chase (Muschert, 2002). The 2007 Virginia Tech shooter, the 2011 Norway killer, and the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary school shooter are also examples of mass killers who received large amounts of media attention but were not included in this study.

In retrospect, there were also several decisions regarding offender selection that could have been improved. First, the San Bernardino attackers were coded as a co-offending pair, which means that their media coverage values only include cases where both shooters' names appeared in a media story, not cases where only one shooter's name appeared. Their results are therefore lower than if each offender had been coded separately. Second, it would have been preferable if both Boston Bombers had been included in this study, instead of only the younger brother who was embroiled in the *Rolling Stone* magazine controversy. Third, it would have been informative to add the Washington, DC Navy Yard shooter to this study. He committed one of the five deadliest public mass shootings in the United States during the study period, and was the only U.S. offender of that level of prominence to not be included.

Results

Table 2 presents total, mean, and median coverage values. Overall, the mass killers in this study received approximately $75 million in total media coverage value from 2013-2017, for an average of more than $10.6 million each. Particularly noteworthy are the younger Boston Marathon bomber who attacked in April 2013 and received more than $38 million in coverage in the following four years, the Charleston church shooter who attacked in June 2015 and received more than $17 million in coverage in less than two years, and the Orlando nightclub shooter who attacked in June 2016 and received more than $10 million in coverage in less than one year. When adjusting the amount of coverage that mass killers received for the number of relevant months, the mass killers (mean: $480,592; median: $178,397) received substantially

more than the professional athletes (mean: $246,328; median: $66,020) and slightly less than the TV and film stars (mean: $546,729; median: $201,119).

Table 2. Total, Mean, and Median Earned Media Coverage Values, 2013-2017*

Celebrity category	Total media coverage value for individuals within category	Media coverage value per individual		Relevant months per individual	Media coverage value per individual, per relevant month	
		mean (SD)	median	mean	mean (SD)	median
Selected mass killers (n = 7)	$74,683,967	$10,669,138 ($13,420,738)	$3,960,408	22.2	$480,592 ($604,538)	$178,397
NFL, NBA, & MLB players (n = 256)	$3,089,937,296	$12,070,068 ($28,931,636)	$3,234,971	49	$246,328 ($590,442)	$66,020
TV/Film artists & entertainers (n = 350)	$9,376,395,553	$26,789,702 ($69,838,328)	$9,854,840	49	$546,729 ($1,425,272)	$201,119

Source: mediaQuant (2017).
*Data span March 1, 2013-March 31, 2017.
Note: Relevant months included the entire time period for the TV/Film artists & entertainers and NFL, NBA, & MLB players, and the entire post-attack time period for the mass killers.

The present study also closely examined attack months, which are when the fame and attention received by offenders should be the highest, because that is when their attacks were most newsworthy. During these attack months, the mass killers ranked much higher in media coverage value received than most television/film artists and entertainers and professional athletes (see Table 3). For example, the younger Boston Marathon bomber ranked #2/607 celebrities in media coverage value for April 2013, with more than double the coverage received by Kim Kardashian or Brad Pitt. Similarly, the Orlando nightclub shooter (#10/607) ranked above Chris Rock and Johnny Depp, and the Charleston church shooter (#15/607) ranked above Ben Affleck and Tom Cruise. Even some of the less covered mass killers still surpassed many famous celebrities and ranked relatively highly: the Santa Barbara killer ranked #95/607, the Nice, France truck attacker ranked #127/607, the San Bernardino shooters ranked #145/607, and the Umpqua Community College shooter ranked #253/607.

Table 3. Comparison of Earned Media Coverage Values for Mass Killers and Celebrities During Attack Months Only

Attack Month	Relevant mass killer rank among celebrities	Relevant mass killer single month media coverage value	Comparable celebrity single month media coverage values
April 2013	#2/607: Boston bomber (younger brother)	$9.6 million: Boston bomber (younger brother)	$3.7 million: Kim Kardashian $3.5 million: Brad Pitt
May 2014	#95/607 : Santa Barbara killer	$702K: Santa Barbara killer	$684K: Tony Romo $639K: Shaquille O'Neal
June 2015	#15/607: Charleston church shooter	$1.8 million: Charleston church shooter	$1.5 million: Ben Affleck $1.3 million: Tom Cruise
Oct. 2015	#253/607: Umpqua Comm. College shooter	$137K: Umpqua Comm. College shooter	$135K: Eddie Redmayne $134K: Naomi Watts
Dec. 2015	#145/607: San Bernardino shooters*	$811K: San Bernardino shooters*	$809K: Jennifer Aniston $809K: James Franco
June 2016	#10/607: Orlando nightclub shooter	$5.3 million: Orlando nightclub shooter	$4.4 million: Chris Rock $3.7 million: Johnny Depp
July 2016	#127/607: Nice, France truck attacker	$474K: Nice, France truck attacker	$471K: Anne Hathaway $467K: Will Smith

Source: mediaQuant (2017).
Note: All figures are reported in real numbers: no adjustments were made for mass killers' attacks occurring partially through a given month.
*The San Bernardino rank and media value only includes cases where both shooters' names appeared in a media story, not cases where only one shooter's name appeared.

Finally, comparisons were made between the traditional media coverage, online search interest, and Twitter interest that each mass killer received during his or her attack month, based on mediaQuant's comparative rating scale of 0-100 (see Table 4). Overall, findings suggest that mass killers averaged substantially more traditional media coverage (mediaQuant rating: 87) than online search interest (mediaQuant rating: 61) and Twitter interest (mediaQuant rating: 31). In all cases, the traditional media coverage of mass killers exceeded the Twitter interest in these offenders. The gap between traditional media coverage and online search interest showed a bit more variation. There was far more traditional media coverage of the younger Boston bomber, the Charleston church shooter, the Santa Barbara killer, and the San Bernardino shooters than the corresponding levels of online search interest. For the

Orlando shooter, the gap was somewhat smaller (traditional media coverage: 94; online search interest: 87). Finally, the Nice, France truck attacker (traditional media coverage: 78; online search interest: 88) and Umpqua Community College shooter (traditional media coverage: 73; online search interest: 75) were the only mass killers who actually received more online search interest than traditional media coverage.

Table 4. Comparison of Traditional Media Coverage, Online Search Interest, and Twitter Interest for Mass Killers During Attack Months

Attack Month	Mass killer	Traditional Media Coverage (mediaQuant rating: 0-100)	Online Search Interest (mediaQuant rating: 0-100)	Twitter Interest (mediaQuant rating: 0-100)
April 2013	Boston bomber (younger brother)	98	43	63
May 2014	Santa Barbara killer	83	48	38
June 2015	Charleston church shooter	91	30	51
Oct. 2015	Umpqua Comm. College shooter	73	75	12
Dec. 2015	San Bernardino shooters	90	58	12
June 2016	Orlando nightclub shooter	94	87	34
July 2016	Nice, France truck attacker	78	88	10
Average for mass killers during attack months		87	61	31

Note: mediaQuant ratings (0-100) are calculated based on their comparative analysis of more than 4,000 topics, including business and consumer trends, product brands, political figures, and celebrities. "Traditional media coverage" ratings were based on the average from worldwide newspapers, top 50 U.S. newspapers, television broadcast and cable news, and other regional media in North America, Europe, and Asia.

Discussion

Comparing Mass Killers with High Profile Celebrities

Overall, the present study's findings suggest that it is not hyperbolic to equate mass killers with other high profile celebrities—they may be extremely similar based on the value of

earned media coverage they receive. After comparing perpetrators of seven mass killings from 2013-2017 with more than 600 celebrities over the same time period, this study found that for many months following their attacks, mass killers received more media coverage value than professional athletes and only slightly less than television and film stars. This suggests that the high level of media attention that mass killers receive is not limited to the immediate aftermath of their crimes, but instead continues for extended periods of time.

Furthermore, during their specific attack months, all of the studied mass killers ranked above the median level for celebrities in earned media coverage value, with four mass killers ranked among the top 100 celebrities, and three mass killers ranked among the top 20. Some mass killers received more highly valued coverage than some of the most famous American celebrities, including Kim Kardashian, Brad Pitt, Tom Cruise, Johnny Depp, Jennifer Aniston, Ben Affleck, and Shaquille O'Neal. And to reiterate, because no adjustments were made for these comparisons to account for attacks occurring part way through a month, or for media coverage time-stamped in prior months, these findings actually underestimate the amounts of media attention in U.S. dollars that these mass killers received.

Whereas winning a Nobel or Pulitzer Prize may fail to guarantee true celebrity status—as the aforementioned cases of Daniel Berehulak, David Thouless, Duncan Haldane, and J. Michael Kosterlitz demonstrate—committing a public mass killing that harms a large number of victims seems quite likely to succeed. In fact, during their attack months, the studied mass killers received more earned media value than many past winners of Academy Awards, Emmys, Super Bowls, World Series, and NBA championships. For all intents and purposes, these findings suggest that the media is unintentionally making some mass killers into virtual celebrities.

"Celebrity Endorsements" of Mass Killings

The de facto celebrity status that mass killers obtain is precisely what many of these offenders wanted, which means the media is rewarding them for their homicidal behavior (Helfgott, 2015; Lankford, 2016). However, of perhaps greater concern is the possibility that by giving free advertising to mass killers, the media may transform them into "celebrity endorsers" or pitchmen who functionally "sell" the opportunity to be like them to a small market of susceptible consumers. Some of these at-risk consumers may eventually become copycats and commit mass killings of their own.

A great deal of prior research suggests that advertising is often more influential and effective when it comes from a celebrity endorser who has been personally involved with the product or experience (Agrawal & Kamakura, 1995; Chung et al., 2013; Johnson, 2005; McCormick, 2016; Muda et al., 2014). For instance, through his accomplishments Michael Jordan helped advertise basketball to a subset of Americans who likely would not have taken up the sport if not for him (Grundy et al., 2014). Tiger Woods did the same with increasing golf participation in the United States and abroad (Chung et al., 2013; Herrington, 2016). And highly publicized mass killers may similarly increase participation in their particular form of mass murder.

The fact that most people despise mass killers does not negate the potential effects of their celebrity endorsements—it just shrinks their potential market of consumers. Again, even celebrities who receive negative media coverage and who are far from universally liked can

exert powerful influence over a subset of the population. As reviewed earlier, Donald Trump is one recent example, given the free advertising he received from the media during his presidential campaign and its apparent effects on his supporters. Beyond that case, surveys suggest that less than 30% of Americans have favorable opinions of Howard Stern, Justin Bieber, Lady Gaga, and Jay-Z, and less than 40% have favorable opinions of Tom Brady and Katy Perry (Gallup, 2017; Public Policy Polling, 2013, 2015). However, that has not stopped these celebrities from collecting millions of fans who are influenced by their behavior. More extremely, even after Michael Jackson was charged with child molestation and Kobe Bryant was charged with rape, both individuals maintained support from a subset of consumers who strongly identified with them, and who stated they were no less likely to purchase or recommend products endorsed by these celebrities (Johnson, 2005).

By comparison, mass killers have far fewer fans, but such fans do exist and may be influenced in similar ways. For instance, Langman (2017b) identified 32 attackers who cited the 1999 Columbine shooters as role models and 8 attackers who considered the 2007 Virginia Tech shooter to be a role model. One of the most notable followers was the 2012 Sandy Hook shooter, who for at least three years prior to his attack, was an ardent fan of school shooters and participated in an online forum dedicated to them (Lankford, 2016). Much like some aspiring fans of actors and athletes go see their films and sporting events, with the hope of one day becoming a famous actor or athlete themselves—the Sandy Hook shooter found it exciting to watch movies about famous school shooters, and then eventually decided to become one himself (Lankford, 2016). This might never have occurred if not for the celebrity status of prior mass shooters and their implicit endorsements of mass killing. Even more recently, the 2016 Munich shooter compiled a scrapbook of news clippings of previous offenders, which sounds similar to other forms of celebrity adulation (Agerholm, 2016). More broadly, many other mass shooters have also been inspired and influenced by the celebrity killers who came before them (Follman & Andrews, 2015; Helfgott, 2015; Langman, 2017b; Larkin, 2009).

Differences in "Supply" and "Demand" for Mass Killer Information

Apart from its comparisons between mass killers and celebrities, the present study also found that most mass killers received more coverage from newspapers and broadcast/cable news than the public interest they generated through online searches and Twitter seems to warrant. In general, this gap between traditional media coverage and other forms of public interest seems atypical: for many other newsworthy subjects, traditional media coverage, online search interest, and Twitter interest appear more closely correlated. For instance, Donald Trump rates highly in all three: the fact that traditional media outlets have covered him so extensively has not led to lower levels of interest from Twitter or online searches. However, according to mediaQuant ratings, all mass killers in the present study received more traditional media coverage than Twitter interest, and most of them received more traditional media coverage than online search interest.

Because coverage from traditional media organizations may represent the "supply" of information on mass killers, while online search interest and Twitter interest may represent the "demand" for information, this raises important questions about whether the media are providing more coverage of mass killers than the public actually wants. If that is the case, it has

direct implications for recent proposals that call on the media to stop publishing the identities of mass killers (Baddour, 2015; Lankford & Madfis, 2017; Stelter, 2015). If many consumers already feel like mass killings receive too much coverage, they might react far more positively to a major reduction in coverage of these perpetrators than some members of the media expect.

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