

Media and Social Media's Impact on Citizens' Perception of the Frequency of Crime Occurrence in the United States

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact media, and social media has on Americans' perception of crime rates in the United States of America. In addition, the research also explored the association between the frequency of viewing media outlets, and the prevalence of the use of social media and how it impacts one's perception of crime rates. The research consisted of 370 participants. Close ended surveys were provided with the research question asking "How much does media, and social media influence your perception of how often crime occurs". A multinomial logistic regression was conducted to determine the extent to which perceptions of rate of crime occurrence was related to the outcome measured.

Introduction

The majority of American citizens use social media to keep in contact with family and friends, as well as to get information on politics, and crime. For many, social media is their primary source for obtaining national, and international news. In addition, traditional media outlets such as television, radio, and periodicals provide viewers, listeners, and readers with continuous coverage of criminal acts in local areas. However, coverage does not always reflect the accuracy of crime statistics. Often, the media creates an idea that the presence of crime is more prevalent than it actually occurs. This fallacy is due to the repeat airing of criminal activity on a regular basis. In addition, social media outlets such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter also contribute significantly to citizens' perception of how often crime occurs. The ease of sharing immediately, abundantly, and repetitively criminal activity via social networks such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat, coupled with saturated air time on conventional crime through media outlets creates a fallacy that manipulates the accuracy of the perceived level of crime occurrence in America. Currently, overall in the United States crime is down and has continued this trend since 1991. However, violent crime, and property crime have experienced a slight increase. Despite current statistics, social media and the media creates a perception that crime is increasing significantly. In fact, the media and social media creates a fallacy that conventional crime has more of a negative impact on society than does white collar crime. The purpose of this study was to examine the effects media, and social media have on Americans' perception of crime rates in the United States of America. In addition, the research also explored the association between the frequency of viewing media outlets and the prevalence of the use of social media, and how it impacts one's perception of crime rates. This study bridged the gap in the literature between what is known about citizens' perception of crime occurrence, and what was unknown about factors that influence their beliefs.

Literature Review

While the Uniform Crime Report is responsible for accurately recording crime and delinquency statistics in the United States, many citizens do not have immediate access to it, and as a result, do not rely on it as a means for understanding how often crime occurs. Current advancements in technology have made it fast and convenient for people to view reports of criminal activity in different areas across the world. Social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, etc.), and the media (News, Radio, Periodicals, and News Websites) are the outlets that people rely on initially for their updates on illegal activities, and current events. Much of the previous research on the topic of citizens' perceptions of crime examined the media's influence on citizens' fear of crime.

There is a significant absence in the literature on what factors influence citizens' perception of how frequently they believe crime occurs. In 2004 Ditton, Chadee, Farrall, Gilchrist, and Bannister conducted a study titled *From Imitation to Intimidation*. The purpose of the research was to examine the correlation between media reports, and citizens' fear of crime. The study was a mixed methods study, and consisted of 167 participants.

Out of the 167 participants, 64 provided qualitative responses. The results of the research suggested that frequent viewers of television were more likely to believe that they might become crime victims—particularly of violence—than light television viewers (Ditton et al., 2004). Like Ditton et al., in 2003 Romer, Jamison, and Ady explored how viewing news outlets on television impacted citizens' fear of crime. The researchers analyzed the results of a national survey of perceived risk, a 5-year span of the General Social Survey (1990–1994), and the results of a recent survey of over 2,300 Philadelphia residents (Romer et al., 2003). The results indicate that across a wide spectrum of the population and independent of local crime rates, viewing local television news was related to increased fear of and concern about crime (Romer et al., 2003). While the study identified a relationship between viewing the news, and fear of crime, there remained an absence in the literature on how media, and social media impacted citizens' belief of the frequency of crime occurrence in the United States. As with other studies, Weitzer, and Kubrin(2004) found a significant positive relationship between the frequency of exposure of local television news, and fear, and between local television as respondents' most important news source and fear. In addition to their results being consistent with the findings of previous literature, their study also left a gap in the body of knowledge on the media, and social media's impact on how often citizens believed criminal acts transpired in America. Understanding the relationship between media, and social media's impact on citizens perception of frequency of crime occurrence is important, because one's perception of how often criminal acts occur may be directly associated with one's feelings of lack of safety. While the results of previous studies were consistent, they did not examine the impact media (news, radio, periodicals, and electronic news sources), and social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, etc.) had on citizens' perceptions of how often crime occurs in the United States. The current body of knowledge is clear that media increases fear of crime and victimization. However, what is unknown, is if the fear citizens have of crime is because of the media and social media's influence on their perception of how often crime occurs in the United States. The purpose of this study was to examine the impact media, and social media has on Americans' perception of crime rates in the United States of America. In addition, the research also explored the association between the frequency of viewing media outlets and the prevalence of the use of social media, and how it impacts one's perception of crime rates.

Methodology

Purpose of Study

The research was conducted to examine the impact media, and social media has on Americans' perception of crime rates in the United States of America. While previous studies have focused on the psychological effects of crime on United States citizens, researchers have not examined factors that influence citizens' perceptions of how often crime occurs. Currently, the significant use of social media, and other media outlets (news, radio, periodicals) are the primary methods of informing citizens of acts of crime. This often provides citizens with accounts in real time, and makes it easy for them to share with friends, family, and others quickly, and repeatedly. As a result, this research bridges the gap in the literature by providing an analysis of how influential social media, and the media are on people's perception of how often criminal acts are committed in the United States.

Target Population, Participant Selection and Sampling Procedure

The population for this study consisted of United States citizens that were eighteen years or older. From this population 370 participants made up the sample size. Random sampling was used to obtain the participants for the research. The aforementioned method of sampling was selected because it creates strong internal validity. All races and genders were eligible to participate.

Data Collection Procedures

Closed ended surveys were provided to the participants. Each survey was administered electronically and consisted of ten closed ended questions. All responses of the participants were confidential. Information received from the survey was the participant's age (coded as 1 for 18-24, 2 for 25-34, 3 for 35-44, 4 for 45-54, 5 for 55-64, 6 for 65-74 and 7 for 75 and over), gender (coded as 1 for male and 2 for female), race (coded as 1 for Caucasian, 2 for African American, 3 for Hispanic/Latino, 4 for Asian, and 5 for other), highest level of education obtained

(coded as 1 for high school graduate, 2 for some college, 3 for Bachelor's Degree, and 4 for Graduate Degree, Professional Degree, or More), how many days per week the participant watch the news (coded as 1 for 1-3 days per week, 2 for 4-6 days per week, and 3 for 7 days per week), viewing of social media timeline posts or shared posts by friends on acts of crime that have occurred in the United States (coded as 1 for yes, and 2 for no).

Number of times per day the participants see social media posts by friends on crimes that have occurred in the U.S. (coded as 1 for 1-3 times per day, 2 for 4-6 times per day, 3 for 7-9 times per day, 4 for more than 10 times per day, and 5 for none), the belief of the participants that social media influences their perceptions of how often crime occurs in the United States (coded as 1 for yes, 2 for no), the belief of the participants that media (News) influences their perceptions of how often crime occurs in the United States (coded as 1 for yes, and 2 for no), and the belief of the participant of which (media or social media) has a greater influence on their perception of how often crime occurs in the United States (coded as 1 for social media, 2 for media (news), and 3 for neither).

Data Analysis

The questions constructed for this research were "Do you believe social media influences your perception of how often you believe crime occurs in the United States", and "Do you believe the media (News) influences your perception of how often crime occurs in the United States". In addition, other questions asked were "How many days per week do you watch the news", "Do you see on your social media timeline, posts or shared posts by friends on acts of crime that have occurred in the United States", and "How many times per week do you see social media posts by your friends on crimes that have occurred in the United States". In the study, the independent variables were age, race, gender, level of education, frequency of viewing crime on the news, and frequency of viewing posts about crime on social media. The dependent variable was the rate of influence on the participants' belief of the frequency of crime occurrence in the United States. A multinomial logistic regression was conducted to determine the extent to which perceptions of rate of crime occurrence were related to the outcome measured.

Results

Frequencies and percentages of all survey variables are displayed in Table 1. The majority of the sample was younger than 45 years of age (86.2%), was non-Caucasian (73.9%), female (63.8%), and had an educational level of at least some college or higher (90.5%). The majority of participants reported watching the news 1–3 days per week (61.6%), seeing social media posts on crime that occurred in the U.S. (91.9%), and believing that both social media (69.5%) and media (news; 73.0%) influence their perception of how often crime occurs in the U.S. The largest proportion of participants reported seeing social media posts on crime 1–3 times per day (43.5%), followed by 4–6 times per day (32.2%), and more than 10 times per day (11.1%). When asked which source they believed has a greater influence on their perception of how often crime occurs in the U.S., the largest proportion of participants responded with social media (40.3%), followed by media (news), and neither (22.2%). To examine whether the survey variables predicted participants' perception on their influence of crime frequency in the U.S., a multinomial logistic regression was conducted (see Table 2). The outcome variable, was the extent to which participants believed social media, media (news), or neither had a greater influence on how often crime occurs in the U.S. For the analysis, social media was the reference category. The predictors included the ordinal variables of age, education, frequency per day of seeing social media crime, and frequency per week of watching the news. The predictors also included dummy coded variables of race, gender, belief of social media influence, belief of media (news) influence with the reference groups being African American, male, and no, respectively. The results revealed that the full model was significant, $\chi^2(20) = 213.64, p < .001, Nagelkerke R^2 = .503$. In inspecting the parameter estimates, frequency per day of seeing crime on social media significantly predicted participants' perception of their influence of crime frequency when controlling for other variables in the model. Specifically, the more frequent participants reported seeing crime on social media, the less likely they were to report media (news) as having a greater influence on their perception than they were to report social media, $B = -.328 (OR = .721), p < .001$.

However, the more frequent participants were to see crime on social media, the odds were equal of reporting neither social media nor media (news) as having a greater influence compared to social media, $B = -.276 (OR = .759), p = .134$. In addition, participants' beliefs about both social media and the media (news) influencing their perception significantly predicted their perception of their influence of crime frequency when controlling for other variables in the model.

Specifically, for participants who reported that social media influences their perception of crime frequency in the U.S., participants were 20.8 times more likely to report social media as a greater influence than media (news), $B = -3.04$ ($OR = .048$), $p < .001$, and were 27.8 times more likely to report social media as a greater influence than neither source, $B = -3.32$ ($OR = .036$), $p < .001$.

In contrast, for participants who reported that media (news) influences their perception on crime frequency in the U.S., participants were 15.7 times more likely to report media (news) as a greater influence than social media, $B = 2.76$ ($OR = 15.722$), $p < .001$, but equally likely to report neither source as a greater influence than social media, $B = -.568$ ($OR = .567$), $p = .248$. None of the other predictors in the model significantly predicted influence perception of crime frequency. Overall, the results suggest that frequency of seeing social media posts on crime that occurred in the U.S. had a greater influence on the participants' perception of how often crime occurs in America.

Recommendation for Future Studies

The results of the research indicate future studies should examine the environment of residence in which the participants reside. This would assist with understanding if the participants' perception of crime frequency is due to their sole reliance on media and or social media, or if it is due to witnessed acts of crime in their neighborhoods. In addition, as media, and social media was compared to determine which had a greater impact on citizens' perception of the frequency of crime occurrence, environment of residence (urban, suburban and rural) should also be compare to media/social media to assist in determining which has a greater impact on the perception being measured.

Conclusion

While previous studies focused on media/social media's impact on citizens' fear of crime, there was an absence in the literature on the impact media/social media have on citizens' perceptions of the frequency of crime occurrence in the United States. This research examined the impact media, and social media have on Americans' perception of crime rates in the United States of America. In addition, the research also explored the association between the frequency of viewing media outlets and the prevalence of the use of social media, and how it impacts one's perception of crime rates. The results of the study suggested that overall, media and social media influenced their perceptions of how frequently crime occurs in the U.S. More specifically, social media had a greater influence on their perception of crime rates in the United States than did the media.

Table 1 Frequencies and Percentages of Survey Variables (N=370)

	<i>n</i>	%
Age		
18–24	125	33.8
25–34	80	21.6
35–44	114	30.8
45–54	27	7.3
55–64	17	4.6
65–74	5	1.4
75 or older	2	0.5
Race		
Caucasian	97	26.2
African American	169	45.7
Hispanic/Latino	84	22.7
Asian	5	1.4
Other	15	4.1
Gender		
Male	134	36.2
Female	236	63.8
Education		
High school graduate	35	9.5
Some college	167	45.1
Bachelor's degree	91	24.6
Graduate degree, professional degree, or higher	77	20.8

Frequency per week of watching the news		
1-3 days per week	228	61.6
4-6 days per week	91	24.6
7 days per week	51	13.8
See social media posts on crime		
No	28	7.6
Yes	340	91.9
Did not respond	2	0.5
Frequency per day of seeing crime on social media		
None	15	4.1
1-3 times per day	161	43.5
4-6 times per day	119	32.2
7-9 times per day	33	8.9
More than 10 times per day	41	11.1
Did not respond	1	0.3
Belief of social media influence		
No	109	29.5
Yes	257	69.5
Did not respond	4	1.1
Belief of media influence		
No	99	26.8
Yes	270	73.0
Did not respond	1	0.3
Influence on perception of crime frequency		
Social media	149	40.3
Media (news)	139	37.6
Neither	82	22.2

Table 2 Summary of Multinomial Regression Predicting Influences on Perception of Crime Frequency (N = 370)

Outcome and predictor	B	SE	Wald	OR	p	95% CI for OR	
						LL	UL
Media (news)							
Age	0.13	0.13	1.04	1.14	.308	0.89	1.46
Race—Caucasian	0.40	0.36	1.26	1.49	.261	0.74	3.00
Race—Hispanic/Latino	0.17	0.33	0.25	1.18	.620	0.61	2.27
Race—other	-0.66	0.60	1.25	0.52	.264	0.16	1.65
Gender—female	0.12	0.30	0.17	1.13	.683	0.63	2.02
Education	0.13	0.16	0.68	1.14	.409	0.84	1.56
Frequency per week of watching the news	0.21	0.21	0.97	1.23	.325	0.81	1.86
Frequency per day of seeing crime on social media	-0.33	0.13	6.01	0.72	.014	0.55	0.94
Belief of social media influence	-3.04	0.57	28.49	0.05	<.001	0.02	0.15
Belief of media (news) influence	2.76	0.58	22.72	15.72	<.001	5.06	48.81
Neither							
Age	0.24	0.17	2.01	1.28	.156	0.91	1.78
Race—Caucasian	-0.06	0.47	0.01	0.95	.907	0.38	2.38
Race—Hispanic/Latino	-0.22	0.52	0.18	0.81	.676	0.29	2.21
Race—other	-0.83	0.94	0.77	0.44	.379	0.07	2.76
Gender—female	-0.61	0.40	2.35	0.55	.125	0.25	1.18
Education	0.10	0.23	0.18	1.10	.673	0.71	1.71
Frequency per week of watching the news	0.23	0.28	0.67	1.26	.412	0.73	2.18
Frequency per day of seeing crime on social media	-0.28	0.18	2.25	0.76	.134	0.53	1.09
Belief of social media influence	-3.32	0.53	38.58	0.04	<.001	0.01	0.10
Belief of media (news) influence	-0.57	0.49	1.33	0.57	.248	0.22	1.49

Note. Full Model: $\chi^2(20) = 213.64$, $p < .001$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = .503$. Reference groups for outcome variable: influences on perception of crime frequency = social media, and for predictors: race = African American, gender = male, belief of social media influence = no, and belief of media (news) influence = no.

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