

This is a postprint version of the article:

Raitanen, J. & Oksanen, A. (2018) Global Online Subculture surrounding School Shootings. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 62(2), 195–209. DOI: 10.1177/0002764218755835.

<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0002764218755835>

Reprinted by permission of SAGE Publications

Global Online Subculture surrounding School Shootings

Abstract

This study is grounded in extensive online ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with 22 people who expressed a deep interest in school shootings. Such people form a global online subculture; they share common interests and find the same cultural objects important. Media accounts of school shootings have fueled this subculture; its members participate in the re-creation and circulation of online media content and give new meanings to that content. We found that people deeply interested in school shootings do not form a homogenous group, and they are divided to four subgroups within the subculture based on members' focus and interest: researchers, fan girls, Columbiners and copycats. Out of these, copycats are the only subgroup explicitly interested in replicating the acts, although subgroup membership can overlap, and members can move from one subgroup to another. Beyond copycats, other subgroups also participate in giving perpetrators fame and circulate reasons for the shootings. These accounts may influence future perpetrators.

Keywords: school shootings, social media, Internet, subculture, ethnography

Introduction

The internet has played a role in school shootings since the 1999 Columbine massacre. School shooters have been inspired by the previous shootings and shooters, as well as by the media's portrayals of them (Bondü & Scheithauer, 2012, p. 73, Kiilakoski & Oksanen, 2011; Larkin, 2009; Robertz & Wickenhäuser, 2010). The perpetrators have also used the internet and social media to attract followings and to communicate their ideas and ideologies to the public by uploading videos and texts prior to their attacks (Böckler & Seeger, 2013; Kiilakoski & Oksanen, 2011; Larkin 2007, 2009; Paton, 2012; Sandberg, Oksanen, Berntzen, & Kiilakoski, 2014). Perpetrators have also mentioned the desire to become famous as a motivation for their shootings (Lankford, 2014; Larkin, 2009; Sandberg et al., 2014).

The most influential school shooting has been the 1999 Columbine massacre. The Columbine perpetrators claimed their massacre was a political act, conducted in the name of other oppressed students (Larkin, 2007; Larkin 2009). In a videotape, one of them argued that with their massacre they would "kick-start a revolution" of the dispossessed (Gibbs & Roche, 1999). They also videotaped themselves, and one of the perpetrators posted writings, such as rants and death threats, online (Larkin, 2007; Larkin, 2009). Despite the cultural relevance of the Columbine school shooting case, the culture of school shootings has evolved now on social media and it is hence important to understand and analyze the current social media communities surrounding school shootings.

Social media today provides easy access to material concerning various extreme topics, including sites dedicated to death, murder, and massacres. Such sites circulate real footage and media information concerning extreme events such as mass murder (Keipi, Näsi, Oksanen, & Räsänen, 2017). More importantly, the rise of social media has made it easy for people to engage in such extreme online communities and to find similarly minded people (Oksanen, Hawdon, & Räsänen, 2014). Online communities involve groups of individuals interacting regardless of the existence of direct friendship links among them (Oksanen et al., 2015; Schweitzer & Garcia, 2010). Rather, the members of online communities are bonded by shared interests or goals (Keipi et al., 2017). In the case of online school shooting communities, the members' shared interests lie in school shootings and shooters. Researchers have proven the existence of web pages and online communities dedicated to school shootings and shooters (Böckler & Seeger, 2013; Oksanen et al., 2014; Paton, 2012; Paton & Figeac, 2015). In these forums, school shooters and their followers can "negotiate identification, appropriation and protest via their definitions" (Paton, 2012, p. 206). These communities also participate in the creation and re-creation of narratives related to school shootings.

This study continues to investigate the growing importance of social media on the school shooting phenomenon. We analyze the global subculture of people who are deeply interested in school shootings. Our study provides a new global perspective on the phenomenon that is also important due to the rapid changes within social media. The study is grounded in a subcultural theory perspective and also relies on previous studies on school shootings.

School Shootings and Online Subcultures

School shooters have actively used online sources, as has been noted in studies focusing on the perpetrators (Oksanen, Nurmi, Vuori, & Räsänen, 2013; Sandberg et al., 2014). Fewer studies have investigated the broader online community's ties to the phenomenon; to our knowledge, no researchers have closely studied the interlinkage of the media and the people who have deep interests in school shootings. Scholars who have focused on online communities have produced similar outcomes. According to Paton's (2012) research, fandom in school shootings is a subculture that allows teenagers to question social structures. Paton's findings are similar to those of Böckler and Seeger (2013), who saw that, for fans of school shooters, "school shooters not only function as spokespersons for a larger group, but in a sense become the forerunners of a 'revolution of the dispossessed'" (p. 334).

Oksanen et al. (2014) found that most of the school shooting fans on YouTube belonged to a single network that resembled a small-world network. People who were interested in the Columbine shooting formed the core of this network, and its small-world nature made it very easy to access.

Subcultural researchers have emphasized that subcultures have shared values and cultural practices, that their members use symbols and signs to identify with each other, and that they do so to subvert the norms of dominant or mainstream society to at least some extent (Blackman, 2014; Hebdige, 1979; Muggleton, 2000). Scholars who have previously studied online school shooting communities have agreed that these communities indeed use similar symbols, signs, and language and that they all engage in discussions that could be considered deviant from the perspective of mainstream society. Oksanen et al. (2014), for example, considered the Columbine attacks to be a central uniting point for fans from various countries. These fans, for example, often repeated slogans such as "in Eric and Dylan I live" (Oksanen et al., 2014, p. 62). Webber (2017) stated that it is difficult to critically separate real people from their media presentations in today's "hyperreal mediascape"; liking a perpetrator of mass violence may thus be similar to liking a violent character in a book. This can be "fairly harmless, except for in these cases where the sensational media make it out to mean something more than it actually can be" (Webber, 2017, p. 128). In this sense, people who are interested

in school shootings could be seen as similar to members of any other subculture with a dark fascination.

Traditionally, subcultures have been limited by space and time; however, some musical subcultures such as punk have been affected by the media (Hebdige, 1979). The so-called post-subcultural turn in the youth studies in the 1990s meant that subcultures were considered fluid and fragmented (Bennett, 2011; Blackman, 2014). This reflected both societal change and the media's increasing influence. Therefore, post-subcultural theorists placed more focus on the media's increasing importance among youth subcultures (Bennett & Kahn-Harris, 2004; McRobbie & Thornton, 1995). Since the 2000s, the rise of the internet—and particularly social media—has allowed various subcultures to act trans-locally and enabled the existence of virtual subcultures (Hodkinson, 2002; Williams, 2011).

Williams (2011, p. 159) noted, however, that it is worth considering the grounds on which websites or forums can be considered subcultural. Websites and (especially) social networking sites are just a starting point for social activity and interaction. Subcultures need active members that use similar signs and symbols. These signs can be relatively stable over time as long as a group has active members (Oksanen et al., 2014; Sandberg, 2013). At the same time, the development of social media has enabled users to maintain anonymity when needed. Social media also provides easy access to and rapid sharing of information, both of which are central to the current media age. It also provides users with fluidity in both identity and consumer preferences. For example, it is possible to be a member of virtual communities and subcultures that are peripheral to one's identity (Ward, 1999, p. 96).

Method

We collected the data for this research via an online ethnography and interviews. Ethnography is a method for understanding the way people live out their lives and make sense of them (Hallett & Barber, 2014; Hine, 2015). In ethnographic research one enters into a social environment which is often unfamiliar, and participates in activities that take part there (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011). As ethnography is “written representation of a culture” (Van Maanen, 2011, p.1), it is not only defined by the data collection process. As Geertz (1973, p. 6) has argued:

--- doing ethnography is establishing rapport, selecting informants, transcribing texts, taking genealogies, mapping fields, keeping a diary, and so on. But it is not these things, techniques and received procedures, that define the enterprise. What defines it is the kind of intellectual effort it is: an elaborate venture in, to borrow a notion from Gilbert Ryle, "thick description".

An online ethnography (i.e., netnography or virtual ethnography) involves ethnographic work conducted on the internet (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012; Markham, 2005), and it can be used to understand today's digital social worlds (Kozinets, 2010). The need for using ethnographic research methods in online environments has been documented for a long time (see for example Wilson & Peterson, 2002). As Hallet and Barber (2014, p. 308) argue, studying people in their “natural habitat” today should include people’s “online habitats,” since relationships and identities are now also being created and reproduced in online spaces. Offline and online social connections are often essentially linked, and the internet has become a place where everyday life happens (Beneito-Montagut, 2011).

We conducted the online ethnography between February 2015 and February 2016. The process was started by visiting a variety of websites and communities. Our aim was to understand the deep interest in school shootings as a phenomenon and how it is present online: for example, what type of material is being published online, what shootings get attention and

how the shooters are presented. Our aim was also to collect information on deep interest in school shootings before conducting the interviews in order to ask more accurate questions and to understand the interviewee's answers and references better.

Because most of the interactions between people who are deeply interested in school shootings are limited to specific sites, three sites became our main focus during the ethnography: Tumblr, DeviantArt, and YouTube. We were also able to participate in a closed Facebook group where people who are deeply interested in school shootings interact. Besides observing the interaction and publications online, we consumed material and media that was often referred to in these online communities. This included for example texts and videos by school shooters and by people deeply interested in them.

We conducted the first round of interviews between June 2015 and September 2016 and the second round of interviews with the same interviewees (seven participants) between May 2016 and February 2017. Interviewees were recruited online by sending invitations to people who, based on their online profiles, seemed to be deeply interested in school shootings. A blog was created on Tumblr where people were able to read about the research. Some interviewees also contacted us directly and expressed that they could be interviewed.

In total, we conducted online interviews with 22 people who are deeply interested in school shootings. To accommodate one interviewee's request, we used e-mail as the interviewing method in that case, but for all other interviews, we conducted chats in Skype. The interviews were semi-structured.

The medium age for the interviewees was 20.2 years (range: 15–32). Of the interviewees, 15 (68%) identified as female, four (18%) as male, and three (14%) as transgender (one genderqueer, one gender-fluid, and one female-to-male transsexual). The interviewees came from many parts of the world: six from the United States; three from Germany; two each from Australia, Mexico, and the United Kingdom; and one each from Hungary, Poland, Portugal, Argentina, Kuwait, Singapore, and the United Arab Emirates.

The first author was responsible for conducting data collection, and she was the only one who had access to the interviewees' personal contact information, identities, or ethnographic data. Throughout the data collection process and whenever using the data, we did our best to anonymize the personal information that we received during the interviews or found when conducting the ethnography. This meant keeping the data collected secure and ensuring that we used no names or nicknames in our research. The only personal information we asked the interviewees to give was their age, gender, and country of origin. We also chose not to use these identifiers in the quotations because, even though most readers would not be able to identify the interviewees' identities, people inside the school shootings community might be able to do this. To further anonymize the interviewees' identities, they are not numbered in the order of their interviews. For the sake of clarity, the most obvious writing mistakes have been corrected in the quotations.

We were strict in our anonymization because a deep interest in school shootings is stigmatized. In addition, many of the interviewees are young and have problematic backgrounds, so they comprise a possibly vulnerable group. In our research, we have chosen to refer to the interviewees as "people who are deeply interested in school shootings," even though the term *fan* has been more commonly used in the previous research. This is because many of the interviewees were strict about not wanting to be labeled as fans and because we found that the interviewees did not form a single, clearly delineated category. Thus, out of respect for the interviewees' self-determination and for scientific clarity, we chose to use the broader category based on deep interest.

Deep Interest in School Shootings as a Subculture

Based on our data, people who are deeply interested in school shootings share similar interests, perceptions, and worldviews, which are often mirrored in their styles and other everyday choices. Such commonly shared factors indicate that these people form a subculture. These objects and ideas are found, shared, and re-created online via social networking sites such as Tumblr, DeviantArt, YouTube, and Facebook.

The common denominator between almost all of our interviewees was their interest in the Columbine massacre: 20 out of 22 interviewees named Columbine as one of the most important shooting for them. Only one interviewee did not mention Columbine at all. Other school shootings that the interviewees identified frequently as being important were the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in the US and the Jokela High School shooting in Finland. Our findings from the ethnography also highlight the importance of Columbine for those who are fascinated by school shootings. For example in Tumblr, pictures and writings of the perpetrators of that massacre are very common. Perceptions of Interviewee 1 highlight the importance of the Columbine massacre to many: "Yes, it's always been about Columbine in my mind. It's the first school shooting I came across and that's how I started to research other shootings, but none of the others interest me so strongly."

Like for Interviewee 1, the Columbine shooting was what also introduced many others to the school shooting phenomenon. Most likely this is due to Columbine shooting's huge media coverage and the shooting's interlinkages with entertainment. Columbine has been featured in films and the shooters left behind cultural materials, including journals and videos that refer to movies, music, and video games. As the Columbine massacre was extensively covered in the media, these meanings were widely disseminated, and later school shooters used them (Kiilakoski & Oksanen, 2011; Larkin, 2009). One of our interviewees explained the importance of the Columbine shooting among people deeply interested in school shootings:

Because Eric and Dylan are easily to relate to. Two white kids that listened to angry music from a different country. The characters they played to the world were cool bad guys. I'm sure in real life they were nerdy, geeky and not as cool as they pass themselves off as but many people, kids especially can see themselves as either them or friends of theirs. They like the same music, play the same games. They were not bad looking and when they put on their "uniforms" they became almost like comic book antiheroes. (Interviewee 2)

Besides their interest in the Columbine shooting, people deeply interested in school shootings also considered the same shooting-related objects as important. The most important cultural objects and style preferences were those that have been linked to the Columbine shooters. These especially include photographs (e.g., the image of the perpetrators' suicide) and texts (e.g., their journals). The interviewees also mentioned shared music preferences and style choices, as well as cultural artifacts that reminded them of their interest in the shooters in their daily lives. For example, Interviewee 3 described the impact the interest had on clothing in the subculture:

I remembered that people would dress up like Eric and Dylan, wearing trench coats or long black coats, black clothing, leather boots or dr. martens and especially their famous t-shirts ("natural selection" and "wrath"). I wore Dylan's t-shirt too, dressed up in black and wore a long black coat during that time.

Based on our interviews and ethnographic research, searching for school shooting related material and editing and circulating it online is a big part of the subculture. Many of this material can be traced to material that media have published. Pictures are often edited by adding objects, such as text, on them. In addition, participants create shooting-related works of art, such as drawings, and share them online. Interviewee 1 described the creation of this type of

art: "Also I've been submitting some of my fan arts of Reb and Vodka on Deviantart, so mostly I used it to transform my 'sick' fascination somehow into art ;)." Reb and Vodka are nicknames that the Columbine killers used.

Besides shared interests and cultural artifacts, we found that many of our interviewees also shared similar experiences in life. Many told about problems with bullying and other social problems they had encountered. These experiences were often connected to perceived similar experiences of school shooters, and some saw that interest in school shootings gave them strength, since they felt they were not alone in their hardships. Many said they could relate with some specific shooters. For example, Interviewee 14 said the following: "I can really relate to Dylan Klebold. Aside from the homicidal thoughts I have a lot of the same feelings that he wrote about having (depression, low self-esteem, wanting to find love, not feeling accepted, etc.)."

Yet, even though we found different common denominators between our interviewees, we found that deep interest in school shootings is divided to different subgroups. This is not surprising, since subcultures are often divided into smaller subgroups, scenes, or styles (Hjelm, Kahn-Harris, & LeVine, 2011; Hodkinson, 2002). We identified four subgroups, based on the participants' focus and level of interest in school shootings. These subgroups were: researchers, fan girls, Columbiners and those who wish to commit a shooting of their own, here referred to as copycats. There is overlap between these four categories, and they are not fixed; members can belong to multiple subgroups or move from one subgroup to another. However, similar ways of categorizing the community arose in many of the interviews.

Researchers

The first group consists of people who are very interested in searching information on school shootings and school shooters. Interviewees often called them *researchers*, as they focus on finding information on school shootings in which they are interested. This material can be very detailed, and include for example searching what was the weather like on the day of the Columbine massacre.

Researchers are interested in understanding why school shootings happen and how the perpetrators were alike and they spend significant amounts of time studying the subject. In some cases, interest in school shootings is linked to interest in other true crime events or in social or political issues, such as on how social structures impact school shootings.

During our ethnography, we found blogs and videos which were focused on distributing information and facts about school shootings, and sometimes answering school shooting related questions. Based on our interviewees, researchers use different sources to find information, and the internet is the main source. There is plenty of school shooting related material online, and due to today's internet based media, information concerning new school shootings can be found online almost instantly. Interviewees described searching information from social media, documentaries, books, and sometimes from academic publications. Interviewee 3 described their research methods, in response to a question about conducting Internet searches on school shootings:

Yes, every day. All information I found on the internet, reports, diaries, videos . . . everything. During that time, there were several forums and websites where i found information. I collected a lot of it on my hard drive.

Although the interests of researchers lies in information and facts about school shootings, they are usually motivated by personal reasons. Many of our interviewees said that they could associate their own life events with those of the perpetrators. One major example of this was experiences with bullying. For some, being a researcher was also mixed with romantic

or fanlike feelings towards specific school shooters which relates to the next subgroup of this subculture: fan girls.

Fan Girls

Fan girls are people whose interest in school shootings is focused on specific school shooters, and the interest usually contains romantic or sexual elements. Based on the interviews, fan girls are typically girls or young women. One of our interviewees also mentioned fan boys who worship school shooters, but did not claim these fan boys have sexual or romantic interest in school shooters. This theme also did not come up in any other interviews, although Langman (2017) identified two male school shooters who appeared romantically or sexually infatuated with the Columbine perpetrators. Overall, however, being a fan girl seems to be usually connected to female gender, as the term implies.

For many fan girls, school shooters have achieved celebrity positions. Thus being a fan of a school shooter is very similar to being a fan of any celebrity. The fandom includes searching for information on one's favorite shooter and it can include having school shooter related memorabilia. For example Interviewee 4, who defined herself as being between a fangirl and a researcher, wrote: "The wallscreen of my iPod is Dylan's picture & I like to draw him, I have a lot of sketches of him. And I follow closely any update of the case in Tumblr..."

Based on the interviews and ethnography, fan girls seem to be focused on specific school shooters as people, and the violence the shooters have conducted is not their main focus. The Columbine shooter referenced above by Interviewee 4 especially is often the subject of fandom and romanticized ideas. This is at least partly explained by the writings in his journal, which often discussed love. Based on the ethnography, fan girl material online often includes humorous aspects, for example funny memes made of one's favorite shooter. In DeviantArt and Tumblr, one can find art made of school shooters where romantic or sexual themes are present. Interviewee 5 described fan girls' behavior in online spaces accordingly: "You can see them all around Tumblr, writing love notes and things like that. Editing pictures with hearts."

In the school shooting communities, the fan girl type interest is sometimes criticized, since their interest is not seen as "real". For example, Interviewee 6 wrote: "I see it as people that just lust over the killers. They are only interested in the "hot" ones. Their knowledge may be very superficial. They are often young teenage girls."

Based on our interviews, being romantically or sexually interested in a school shooter is thus quite often seen as controversial among people deeply interested in school shootings. As fan girl material is common in online communities, many of our interviewees wished to underscore that they do not idolize or admire school shooters as fan girls do. Yet it seems that, for many fan girls, having a crush on a school shooter seems to be quite innocent, it lasts only some time, and it is reminiscent of having a crush on celebrities that are more socially acceptable. For example, one of our interviewees told us that she used to have a crush on one of the Columbine perpetrators because of how much she felt he could understand her, although she did not define herself as a fan girl. When asked why the crush ended, Interviewee 5 answered, "Because I grew out of it, like many people of the fandom have done."

Columbiners

Columbiners are people whose main interest is in the Columbine shooting. Yet, even though most of our interviewees were very interested in Columbine, all of them did not define themselves as Columbiners. This seems to be due to the term's different interpretations.

For some, the term was neutral and used to describe people interested in the Columbine massacre and other school shootings in general: “Usually (as far as I know) there's just a worldwide movement of ‘Columbiners/school shooter fans’ going on” (Interviewee 7). For some, the term had a negative meaning and was connected with superficial knowledge of school shootings and a fan-like attitude. Interviewee 8 linked the term with less serious interest: “Hmm, I think my motives differ from the majority of so-called Columbiners. Because most of them seem to be girls who are sexually attracted to the shooters and have a more humorous way to dwell into this subject.”

Thus, the term Columbiner can be intertwined with other categories of interest, depending on the viewpoint. Interviewee 9 described the different aspects of being a Columbiner:

Some of my friends on Tumblr are Columbiners and they are like you and me, they don't live up to this poor reputation because they treat the fandom as an interest. There are definitely Columbiners who are people you really would not want to associate yourself with, they worship Dylan and Eric and hope to either commit their own shooting or have sex with them.

Some interviewees linked Columbiners to adoration and idolization without the connection with romantic or sexual interest. For example Interviewee 10, who was mostly interested in Columbine, answered accordingly when asked about being a Columbiner: “No I do not because mostly Columbiners admire them. I do not admire them at all or think what they did was right.”

The common denominator among these different definitions is the focus on the Columbine massacre, as the term implies. For many of our interviewees, this meant excessive research on Columbine and also included identification with the other Columbiners and with one or both of the Columbine shooters. As Interviewee 11 explained:

Most Columbiners have one thing in common: we have felt like outsiders or victims at some point in our lives. We have felt like absolutely NObody [sic] could understand how alone we have felt, and that experience is exactly what Eric and Dylan lived. Knowing that there were even just two boys out there who felt the same way as we feel now gives us comfort.

As the media heavily covers school shootings, it is not a surprise that a subculture of people who are deeply interested in school shootings is also seen as newsworthy. Based on the ethnography and the interviews, media is particularly focused on Columbiners and the interest from the media is usually seen in a negative light. Interviewee 12 described media's interest and associated outcomes accordingly:

We just don't want to deal with public scrutiny. I mean heck, it hurts people's feelings to have the news be like “we found these MONSTERS online talking about Columbine. . . . Some friends of mine have had their blogs publicly named by the news and it overwhelmed their blog with traffic. And people will start trolling the Columbine(r) tag.

Even though the term “Columbiner” was a very common sight when conducting the online ethnography, interviews revealed that its definition is not straightforward. Views about the Columbiners are contradictory: some see the term as neutral, others connect it with shallow or unhealthy interest, and for some it stands for a community of people with whom one can finally feel a sense of togetherness.

Copycats

The fourth group comprises those who would like to carry out a school shooting of their own. None of our interviewees defined themselves in this group, but many brought up this issue. For example, Interviewee 6 saw that these types of people form a specific category: “There is also

a third category too, but I haven't come across too many of these - people who idolize them and genuinely want to become killers themselves." Another interviewee divided people deeply interested in school shootings to two groups based on their readiness to use violence:

There are the ones that obsess over school shootings but do no harm cause they feel like they have no reason to, and then there are the ones who are obsessed, and they will commit the act of a school shooting no matter what. (Interviewee 13)

When one is "obsessed" with previous school shootings and wishes to commit an act of their own, the shooting is linked with fame and notoriety. The subject of gaining notoriety through a massacre was well understood among many of our interviewees. Interviewee 6 answered accordingly when asked if committing a school shooting was a way to get famous:

Sadly yeah, I think some people see it that way. They know the newspapers and tabloids will be all over it, their face plastered on every cover, everyone analyzing their lives in great detail, asking why, that probably motivates some people to violence.

One of the most well-known mass shooting enthusiasts who also became a perpetrator was the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooter. He was keenly interested in mass shootings (Murray, 2017), and admired many shooters online (Webber, 2017). He was also part of a Columbine related online forum where he spent three years posting comments about many previous school shooters and mass shooters before his own attack (Coleman, 2014). One of our interviewees discussed the presence of possible school shooters in school shooting related communities by describing their encounter with the Sandy Hook perpetrator:

When you are in a community like this for a long period of time it's only a matter of time [before] someone you know or even just talk to or read their posts kills people or tries to. This has happened a few times with the one going through with it Adam Lanza. (Interviewee 2)

Based on the interviews, many people deeply interested school shootings acknowledge the presence of potential school shooters among their communities. Some brought it up as a concern, and others did not address it at all. Since the school shooting subculture is global, and the interaction between its members is largely anonymous, the risk of encountering a future school shooter in the real world where that person could harm you may not seem like a real possibility.

Discussion

In this article, we have focused on the general characteristics of a subculture of people who have a deep interest in school shootings. We have found out that people who are deeply interested in school shootings share similar perceptions and that they consider many of the same cultural objects to be important. A deep interest in school shootings is not merely present online; it plays a role in the everyday lives of most of this group's members, and it can manifest in their style choices—for example, in clothing and music. In this sense, the subculture of people who are deeply interested in school shooting is similar to other youth subcultures (Muggleton, 2000; Williams, 2011).

As with many other subcultures, a deep interest in school shootings is divided into different subgroups: researchers, fan girls, Columbiners and copycats. These four groups we identified were not fixed, there was overlap between them, and members can move from one subgroup to another, but they indicate that people deeply interested in school shootings do not form a homogenous group. They have different levels and foci of interest, and only the copycats are interested in carrying out a massacre of their own. Thus, even a deep interest in the school shootings does not straightforwardly or inevitably make one a potential school shooter. Yet,

one's focus and level of interest in school shootings can change over time and could become more severe (Oksanen et al. 2013).

A deep interest in school shootings, as a phenomenon, is linked to media's accounts of school shootings. As postsubcultural theorists have emphasized, current subcultures are increasingly linked to traditional and social media (Bennett & Kahn-Harris, 2004; Williams, 2011). This subculture uses the internet and social media to interact, and fast access to a global user network is a key to the subculture's existence. Social media enables users to be active consumers (i.e., prosumers), and individual users continually edit, update and comment on the content (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). Hence, people who are deeply interested in school shootings do not only passively receive media content; they also re-create and circulate it online. Through this process, new meanings are given to that content, and new objects—especially artwork—are created.

People who are deeply interested in school shootings use content that is available online. Thus, even if media were to change policies about reporting of school shootings, the online communities surrounding school shootings likely would not vanish. However, excessive reporting on the shooters and death tolls may increase the shooters' attractiveness in the eyes of some individuals (Oksanen, Hawdon, & Räsänen, 2016). The media make the shooters famous and simplify the reasons for these shootings. As the subculture gets its information on shootings mostly from the media, the media-constructed narratives are likely to be shared globally. Even though most people who are deeply interested in school shootings are not likely to become school shooters themselves, the communities circulate reasons for these massacres and participate in creating fame and followings for the shooters. These accounts may influence future perpetrators.

There are some limitations in our data. For instance, we had 22 interviewees but were able to re-interview only seven of them. In particular, due to our research topic, the interviewees were hard to reach. Our ethnographic research lasted for only one year and was focused on only a few sites related to the subject. Despite these limitations, our data are strong, and the results of the ethnography and interviews supported each other. This study also contributes to the literature by showing that this is a relatively stable subculture that has existed for a long time (Böckler & Seeger, 2013; Oksanen et al., 2014; Paton, 2012). Researchers should continue to investigate online subcultures such as those with a deep interest in school shootings. This line of study is important for understanding both social media-era subcultures and the global, mediated phenomenon of school shootings.

References

- Beneito-Montagut, R. (2011). Ethnography goes online: Towards a user-centred methodology to research interpersonal communication on the internet. *Qualitative Research, 11*(6), 716–735.
- Bennett, A. (2011). The post-subcultural turn: Some reflections 10 years on. *Journal of Youth Studies, 14*(5), 493–506.
- Bennett, A., & Kahn-Harris, K. (2004). *After subculture. Critical studies in contemporary youth culture*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Blackman, S. (2014). Subculture theory: An historical and contemporary assessment of the concept for understanding deviance. *Deviant Behavior, 35*(6), 496–512.
- Böckler, N., & Seeger, T. (2013). Revolution of the dispossessed: School shooters and their devotees on the web. In N. Böckler, P. Sitzer, T. Seeger, & W. Heitmeyer (Eds.), *School*

- shootings: International research, case studies, and concepts for prevention* (pp. 309–342). New York, NY: Springer.
- Boellstorff, T., Nardi, B., Pearce, C., & Taylor, T. L. (2012). *Ethnography and virtual worlds: A handbook of method*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Bondü, R., & Scheithauer, H. (2012). Media consumption in German school shooters. In G. W. Muschert & J. Sumiala (Eds.), *School shootings, mediatized violence in a global age* (pp. 69–89). Bingley, England: Emerald Group Publishing Limited.
- Coleman, R. (2014). Adam Lanza's "Shocked Beyond Belief" posts. Version 2.2. Retrieved from https://schoolshooters.info/sites/default/files/lanza_posts_2.2.pdf
- Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I., & Shaw, L. L. (2011). Writing ethnographic fieldnotes. Second edition. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gibbs, N. & Roche, T. (20.12.1999). The Columbine Tapes. *Time*. Retrieved from <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,992873,00.html>
- Hallett, R. E., & Barber, K. (2014). Ethnographic research in a cyber era. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 43(3), 306–330.
- Hebdige, D. (1979). *Subculture: The meaning of style*. London, England: Routledge.
- Hine, C. (2015). *Ethnography for the internet: Embedded, embodied and everyday*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.
- Hjelm, T., Kahn-Harris, K., & LeVine, M. (2011). Heavy metal as controversy and counterculture. *Popular Music History*, 6, 5–18.
- Hodkinson, P. (2002). *Goth: Identity, style and subculture*. Oxford, England: Berg.
- Keipi, T., Näsi, M., Oksanen, A., & Räsänen, P. (2017). *Online hate and harmful content: Cross-national perspectives*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Kiilakoski, T., & Oksanen, A. (2011). Soundtrack of the school shootings, cultural script, music and male rage. *Young*, 19(3), 247–269.
- Kozinets, R. V. (2010). *Netnography: Doing ethnographic research online*. London, England: Sage.
- Langman, P. (2017). Different types of role-model influence and fame-seeking among mass killers and copycat offenders. *American Behavioral Scientist*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764217739663>
- Lankford, A. (2014). Précis of the myth of martyrdom: What really drives suicide bombers, rampage shooters, and other self-destructive killers. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 37(4), 351–362.
- Larkin, R. W. (2007). *Comprehending Columbine*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Larkin, R. W. (2009). The Columbine legacy: Rampage shootings as political acts. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 52(9), 1309–1326.
- Markham, A. N. (2005). The methods, politics, and ethics of representation in online ethnography. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 793–820). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- McRobbie, A., & Thornton, S. L. (1995). Rethinking "moral panic" for multi-mediated social worlds. *British Journal of Sociology*, 46(4), 559–574.
- Muggleton, D. (2000). *Inside subculture: The postmodern meaning of style*. Oxford: Berg.
- Murray, J. L. (2017). Mass media reporting and enabling of mass shootings. *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, 17(2), 114–124.
- Oksanen, A., Garcia, D., Sirola, A., Näsi, M., Kaakinen, M., Keipi, T., & Räsänen, P. (2015). Pro-anorexia and anti-pro-anorexia videos on YouTube: Sentiment analysis of user responses. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 17(11), e256.
- Oksanen, A., Hawdon, J., & Räsänen, P. (2014). Glamorizing rampage online: School shootings fan communities on YouTube. *Technology in Society*, 39, 55–67.

- Oksanen, A., Hawdon, J., & Räsänen, P. (2016). Der schmale grat zwischen leid und entertainment – Berichterstattung finnischer massenmedien nach schweren gewalttaten. [Between grief and entertainment: Finnish school shootings in the media]. In R. Kahr & F. J. Robertz (Eds.), *Die mediale inszenierung von amok und terrorismus. ur medienpsychologischen wirkung des journalismus bei exzessiver Gewalt*. Wiesbaden, Germany: Springer.
- Oksanen, A., Nurmi, J., Vuori, M., & Räsänen, P. (2013). Jokela: The social roots of a school shooting tragedy in Finland. In N. Böckler, T. Seeger, P. Sitzer, & W- Heitmeyer (Eds.), *School shootings: International research, case studies and concepts for prevention* (pp. 189–215). New York, NY: Springer.
- Paton, N. E. (2012). Media participation of school shooters and their fans, navigating between self-distinction and imitation to achieve individuation. In G. W. Muschert & J. Sumiala (Eds.), *School shootings, mediatized violence in a global age* (pp. 203–229). Bingley, England: Emerald Group Publishing Limited.
- Paton, N. E., & Figeac, J. (2015). Muddled boundaries of digital shrines. *Popular Communication*, 13(4), 251–271.
- Ritzer, G., & Jurgenson, N. (2010). Production, consumption, prosumption: The nature of capitalism in the age of the digital prosumer. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 10, 13–36.
- Robertz, F. J., and R. P. Wickenhäuser. 2010. *Der Riss in Der Tafel: Amoklauf Und Schwere Gewalt in Der Schule* (2nd ed.). Berlin, Germany: Springer.
- Sandberg, S. (2013). Cannabis culture: A stable subculture in a changing world. *Criminology & Criminal Justice*, 13(1), 63–79.
- Sandberg, S., Oksanen, A., Berntzen, L. E., & Kiilakoski, T. (2014). Stories in action: The cultural influences of school shootings on the terrorist attacks in Norway. *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 7(2), 277–296.
- Schweitzer, F., & Garcia, D. (2010). An agent-based model of collective emotions in online communities. *The European Physical Journal B-Condensed Matter and Complex Systems*, 77(4), 533–545.
- Van Maanen, J. (2011). Tales of the field: On writing ethnography. Second edition. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Ward, K. I. (1999). Cyber-ethnography and the emergence of the virtually new community. *Journal of Information Technology*, 14, 95–105.
- Webber, J. A. (2017). *Beyond Columbine: School violence and the virtual*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Williams, P. (2011). *Subcultural theory*. Cambridge, England: Polity Press.
- Wilson, S., & Peterson, L. C. (2002). The Anthropology of online communities. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 31(1), 449–467.