

The Splintering Influence of Columbine:

An Application of Cultivation Theory, Cultural Scripts and Current Public Perception of Mass

School Shootings

Capstone Project

Media 499

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Abstract:

This paper is a comprehensive overview of the 1999 Columbine High School Massacre, long held misconceptions held about the event through initial coverage of the mass school shooting, and how these misconceptions have helped to shape the cultural scripts held by today's living generations about school violence, mental health, and how to identify the perpetrator to mass audiences. This paper also includes a historical analysis of mass school shootings within the last two centuries, as well as a contextualization on how the Columbine Massacre greatly altered cultural scripts for such events and its influence, of both its factual evidence and fabricated myths concerning the event, have bled into popular culture, music, fiction novels, and perhaps most hotly-debated, violent video gameplay.

Keywords: Columbine, Mass Shootings, Mass School Shootings, Massacre, Violence, Video Games, Mental Health, Harris, Klebold, Dave Cullen, Cultural Scripts, Violent Media, YA Fiction, Cultivation Theory, Caitlin Doughty, High School.

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Introduction

This study aims to examine the gap in research that has led to a dangerous underrepresentation of the circumstances surrounding the 1999 Columbine School Massacre due to initial news reports from late April in 1999. The myths and misconceptions surrounding the Columbine shooting and its perpetrators, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, that are responsible for creating the current-held cultural scripts surrounding mass school shootings, and how the public views these crimes and the typical demographics of the perpetrators of such crimes even two decades after the attack, despite its fallacies. This study's aim is to capture the manner in which Columbine's dark legacy, of two outcasted, goth teens opening fire on their classmates as revenge for years of bearing mistreatment and bullying from their peers became the prominent script in our culture for mass shootings that have followed for the last twenty years. Due to this belief, twisted individuals, including the Sandy Hook killer in Newtown, Connecticut began to identify with this false narrative; as their ideation and later violent actions can oftentimes be traced back to a deadly fascination with Columbine.

This paper is guided by Dave Cullen's extensive history documenting the first school massacre of the digital age in *Columbine* (2010), combining over a decade of in-depth research, interviews, and historical context to the heinous acts that have become the so-called "gold-standard" for the American school shooting epidemic that has plagued the United States since the mid-1990s, increasingly growing more deadly as the years have passed.

This study also includes an extensive content analysis of various academic articles that take a critical look at the history of intentional mass school shootings, the prominence of school shootings in Young Adult Fiction novels, and how violent video games (games that were perhaps played by shooters themselves or games that require the player to engage violent actions as would be carried out in massacres) could perhaps have a desensitizing effect on humans at the molecular level, though further psychological study is needed to support this theory. This study aims to view these sensitive topics through the lens of cultivation theory and its ability to form cultural scripts. These scripts continue to influence new media content produced and perpetuate certain narratives and how the public perceives the safety of the world about them as well as the motivations behind heinous killings as more continue to unfold.

Research Question

This study poses the question as to whether or not the myths regarding Columbine or more generally, the cultural script for all mass school shootings, is acting upon current high school students' perception of the world, school safety, and perpetrator demographics. It also asks students for specific media that depicts such scenarios and if violent media and video games are to blame for the current epidemic. The hypothesis held for this question is that the survey results will reveal that currently, in the year 2019, over twenty years after the 1999 Columbine Massacre, that few high school students know the true facts regarding the event and that a minority of students will select the correct statistics when presented with accurate data about perpetrator demographics. This study hypothesizes that the long held myths about Columbine have informed the cultural script that high school students rely on for their information about mass school shootings and school safety. The survey will also detail the amount that these youths

have been exposed to works of fiction that directly deal with the subject matter and if the students have been asked to participate in an active shooter and/or lockdown drill at any point in their schooling.

Research Methods

For the purposes of streamlining this research, events regarded as intentional mass school shootings are the basis of this study as mass murders are classified as the killing of four or more individuals in the same incident (FBI, 2005). Historical instances that are used as context for this topic are limited to intentional mass shootings on high school campuses between May 1940 and February 2018 on K-12 campuses in the United States perpetrated by adolescents and adults which is guided through the statistics provided by Katsiyannis, Whitford, & Ennis (2018). That particular set of research is the cornerstone of this study in order to determine misconceptions surrounding mass school shootings held by current high school students. For all intents and purposes, the end date for data collection of prior events ends with the incident at Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida on February 14, 2018.

In order to gauge current public perception of mass school shootings. A survey was conducted with 118 high school English students at Liberty High School in Bakersfield, California administered by Andrea Watson, an English instructor who currently holds a Masters in Education Administration from Arkansas State. This survey was targeted to primarily the freshman class of 2024 and the senior class 2020 and aimed to tackle a number of factors regarding public perception including myths that current high schoolers believe that resulted from early news reporting on Columbine, how cultural scripts for these events have skewed how

the public recalls statistics on perpetrators, and what kind of media these students have encountered that has helped them to form these perceptions.

Historical Examination of Mass School Shootings

Over the 20th and 21st centuries, from the beginning of the 1900s to 2018, there have been 35 incidents of intentional mass school shootings carried out by adult, adolescent, and child perpetrators in the United States according to the research collected by Katsiyannis, Whitford, and Ennis released in April 2018. In order to narrow their research, the researchers stated clearly that they would be following the FBI definition of mass murder, in which 4 or more individuals are killed in the same incident, as there is currently not a definition for mass school shooting. Also, their research was limited to shootings that occurred on elementary, middle school, and high school campuses, excluding college campuses from this list. At the time of their data collection, the latest mass school shooting that aligned with these given factors had been the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida in which 14 students and 3 adults were killed, and 17 students were injured.

This study reveals that though the typical cultural script, in part provided by Columbine's 1999 Massacre, of the bullied, mentally-ill, white, male teen seeking to take revenge on his current or former classmates is indeed one of the most common perpetrators of such acts, but that this archetype of killer does not represent each violent perpetrator that has existed for nearly eight decades of deadly attacks. Though the researchers presented an in-depth presentation of policy implications as a result of these deadly mass school shootings, the study is inherently valuable for the statistics it provides on such occurrences as these are not represented accurately

in current news media due to the cultural scripts held on the topic. These statistics formed the bulk of the survey that was administered to current high schoolers.

Prior to Columbine, the cultural script regarding mass shootings, and more particularly mass school shootings, was typically an outraged individual seeking to enact revenge on specific victims for a perceived wrongdoing, “or the motive was unarticulated and thus unknown,” (Ash & Saunders, 2018, p. 37). Data for mass school shootings beginning in the year 1940 nearly up until 1999, supported this cultural script. However, after Columbine, this became more refined and far more twisted, as the new script began to revolve around killers who sought notoriety and body count over any specific final act of revenge.

Background on the 1999 Columbine Massacre and its Perpetrators

Twenty years have passed since the Columbine High School Massacre that occurred on April 20, 1999, in Littleton, Colorado. Although the perpetrators, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, are well known by today, the errors in the news reporting during the time of the tragedy have been often overlooked and ignored. Some of the first published headlines at the time surrounded a tale of two teenage boys, outcasted from the rest of their school, bullied incessantly by classmates for their dark tastes, interest in goth music, and for being members of the Trench Coat Mafia, a club full of “loners” and other socially outcasted children, acted out in violence against the classmates that had wronged them, opening gunfire on their school. Little did reporters know how little of this story was true as it had been essentially fabricated from a string of faulty eyewitness sources, assumptions from students who had never previously met the killers, and contradicting statements from close friends of the boys and their horror-stricken parents. This initial media coverage and the harrowing story it told influenced countless mass shootings over

the years, striking a chord with twisted individuals who fit the mold that the media placed the shooters within, seeking to gain a fraction of the fame and notoriety that Eric and Dylan had achieved that day; the greater problem being that this story was entirely inaccurate.

Misconceptions about the Columbine Massacre

Although Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris certainly were the perpetrators of this devastating massacre at their high school, little of this initially reported story had been true. Their bodies recovered from the scene along with some limited surveillance footage quickly revealed their involvement in the killings of twelve classmates and one teacher. However, the motives of killers, their pasts, and their personal narratives became convoluted during the first few weeks of news reporting as stories surfaced from classmates, from witnesses, and scattered police records. This pieced-together storyline was formed in these first formative weeks after the incident and despite corrections in reports has remained in the collective memory of Americans and formed the cultural script held today for mass school shootings and the public perception that surrounds them.

Author, mortician, and funeral home director Caitlyn Doughty in partnership with People's Memorial Association and the Co-op Funeral Home released a video essay on the twentieth anniversary of the Columbine School Massacre titled "Why Do We Get Columbine so Wrong?" (Doughty, 2019) revealing these long-held misconceptions about the Columbine shooting that have since shaped the current cultural script surrounding mass school shootings. This brief, informative video essay tackles the splintering effect that the incorrect reporting of Columbine had on public perception and cultural products, including books from the evangelical church, video games (one in particular based on the 1999 massacre itself), and perhaps most

dangerously, on other school shootings that have since occurred, some directly influenced from Columbine. Doughty, citing the work of journalist Dave Cullen and Peter Langman, PhD, began to dismantle some of the myths behind Columbine which will be further dispelled in this study.

These young men, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold had not been bullied, each had solidified a friend group. In fact, Harris was thought of to be an aggressor, a bully himself, often lashing out at Klebold, especially during one instance for his lack of athleticism during a soccer game that cost both of them the win (Cullen, 2010, p.193). They were not members of their school's Trench Coat Mafia club (which was incorrectly reported to have been an organized gang), and they did not listen to any goth musicians besides Marilyn Manson, which was a rarity. Cullen notes that the narrative of bullied teens surfaced due to the anger the students felt towards the perpetrators, who told the media fabricated stories or incorrect assumptions to curb the trauma they had experienced. "The killers were dead, so much of the anger was deflected: onto Goths, Marilyn Manson, the TCM, or anyone who looked, dressed, or acted like the killers—or the media's portrayal of them," (Cullen, 2010, p. 2442). It was at this point in history, as the original news reports began to run featuring students supposedly telling of their firsthand encounters with the shooters before their demise, in which the cultural script for the bullied, white, male teenager seeking revenge against his "normie" classmates was essentially forged. This script has stuck around for almost an entire generation despite that there has been mass school shooters who were nonwhite, some females, and shooters who had never been actively bullied.

Another misconception was that the Columbine Massacre was intended to be a mass school shooting, as it is technically classified as now. The event was an intended bombing that

had failed, the boys had equipped the campus with multiple propane and pipe bombs during the busy lunch hour before commencing the attack. They had kept only a few firearms in order to kill anyone who tried to flee, concealed under long coats and duffle bags, both of which they later discarded. Their homemade bombs did not yield any deaths or contribute to the body count they sought to achieve, though they did cause significant damage to the building.

That said, the perpetrators had no target, had no bullies in mind they wished to unload their vengeance upon, but instead hoped to gain notoriety through the body count they would amass, knowing they would take their own lives within an hour of beginning the attack on their classmates. As Dave Cullen reports in his decade-long research he conducted on the Columbine Massacre, Eric Harris's journals were filled with quotes from German philosophers, including Friedrich Nietzsche, quotes from Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, alongside a detailed account of how he planned to top the record set by Timothy McVeigh in his terrorist attack on the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995 (Cullen, 2010, 546). Harris was motivated by the notoriety that terrorists achieved through their acts of horror and dismay, and this attitude would become the new perceived norm for killers that would succeed him. Harris, calculated, very incorrectly, that by using several bombs planted on the campus and in their cars, they could potentially murder over a thousand people in their very large school, however, being high school students and not experienced bomb-makers, this plan luckily failed.

It is said that Columbine was the first mass shooting of the digital age and was intended to exploit the twenty-four-hour news cycle; which it had used to maximize terror and dread. During what the police reasoned was a hostage standoff, three-hours went by while the terrorized children who were hidden in classrooms frantically began calling local news stations, attempting

to describe the situation, who the perpetrators were, and what they had seen. The students recalled there being up to five shooters due to the perpetrators having their coats early during the first few minutes of the attack, and confusing eyewitness accounts. This information, reaching police outside of the school caused an overestimation of the threat that lie inside the building. This resulted in the death of many students and a teacher that could have otherwise been revived if they had been reached in time.

In such a large school, many students did not even recognize the perpetrators, contributing to their assumptions that they had been outcasted individuals while associating their long coats that concealed their weapons at the onset of the shooting with their school's Trench Coat Mafia club, a group of rather harmless teens in the goth subculture. With these early phone calls from the Columbine High School students, they began to spew the first inklings of what would create the cultural script we have today of mass school shooters, though as we now see, was riddled with inaccuracies.

Cultural Scripts and Columbine's Influence in Popular Culture

Postmodern media has begun to reflect the growing instances of mass shootings. In video games, in music, and in works of fiction, the archetype of the bullied teen who takes revenge on his enemies by opening gunfire has become increasingly prominent in the youth entertainment culture within the United States. Arguably, the script that informs this storyline likely was born out of the stories regarding Columbine. The study conducted by Gwynne Ellen Ash and Jane M. Saunders specifically studies fictional texts on the topic born directly out of the script formed from Columbine's script, though greatly build upon misconceptions, certain factors such as shooter demographics happen to ring true. There is also a significant conversation to be had

about video gaming in two arenas, one being an antisocial influencer, and the other being a virtual, risk free learning environment to work through the social nuances of violence.

Another very crucial aspect to consider is that mass school shootings have become a prominent concern and recurring topic in young adult lives causing the necessity for their representation in media. This has escalated to a point in which fiction authors feel a moral responsibility to write about gruesome killings for an audience of minors in order to help them cope with this devastating reality in our world today; that children die senselessly at the hands of adults, and perhaps most disturbingly, at the hands of other children (Ash & Saunders, 2018, p. 37).

Rampage Shootings in YA Fiction and Grooming Violence

The 2018 study conducted by Gwynne Ellen Ash and Jane M. Saunders examined twelve young adult novels published between 2000 and 2016 that included specific instances of a rampage school shootings. The study in question aimed to identify prominent cultural scripts surrounding school shootings and it explains the manners in which fictional texts could confirm existing scripts, extend them to be more specific or inclusive, or otherwise critique existing scripts and the harmful mistruths they might perpetuate. It is important to note that rampage school shootings are slightly different than mass school shootings which are being classified in this study according to the FBI's definition of mass murder. Rampage shootings, on the other hand, are referencing events in which a killer goes on a murderous rampage with intent to kill, but may not need to actually murder up to four victims in order to fall into this classification. The novels studied were all in response to post-Columbine scripts, each shooter in the twelve novels is a nerdy, white male and although each fictional occurrence is suggestive of shootings being

about retribution, “The authors often challenge the idea that shooters are motivated by bullies,” (Ash & Saunders, 2018, p. 38) which is a move in the right direction of breaking down the harmful consequences of more limited scripts.

One of the most fascinating concepts that the authors have also explored, pushing the boundaries of the current cultural scripts, is the concept of grooming mentally unwell individuals for an attack. This is particularly relevant in regards to the Columbine Massacre. The researchers identify three psychological categories for school shooters, psychopathic, psychotic, and traumatized. “*Psychopathic* shooters like Eric Harris at Columbine High School exhibit entitlement and arrogance; they are likely to have narcissistic features and lack empathy. In contrast, *psychotic* shooters like Brenda Spencer at Cleveland Elementary School experience schizophrenia or similar disorders; they are delusional, often experiencing hallucinations or hearing voices,”(Ash & Saunders, 2018, p. 40). As some are aware, especially if having read Sue Klebold’s *A Mother’s Reckoning*, autobiographical account of her son’s deteriorating mental state and his eventual devastating violence against his classmates and ultimately himself, one might recognize Dylan Klebold as a *traumatized* killer, not fitting perfectly into either above diagnosis. According to his journals, Dylan was likely suffering from major depressive disorder at the time and had been abused and later radicalized by his close friend Eric Harris. Andrew Solomon writes in his introduction to Sue Klebold’s *A Mother’s Reckoning* a detailed explanation for how this grooming could have taken place between the two boys:

Eric Harris appears to have been a homicidal psychopath, and Dylan Klebold, a suicidal depressive, and their disparate madnnesses were each other’s necessary condition. Dylan’s depressiveness would not have turned into murderousness without Harris’s leadership,

but something in Eric might have lost motivation without the thrill of dragging Dylan down with him. Eric's malice is shocking, Dylan's acquiescence, equally so. Dylan wrote, "Thinking of suicide gives me hope that i'll be in my place wherever i go after this life—that ill finally not be at war w. myself, the world, the universe—my mind, body, everywhere, everything is at PEACE—me—my soul (existence)." The most common word in his journals is love. (Solomon, 2017, p. xviii).

As Ash and Saunders conclude, the concept of grooming violence has not yet made it into the nonfictional cultural script for mass shootings but is being explored in fiction, as most shooters are typically thought of as acting alone in their attacks, this terrifying reality should have a greater presence on the forefront of society's minds when it comes to mass school shootings (Ash & Saunders, 2018, p. 41).

Violent Gameplay and Super Columbine Massacre RPG!

One factor often discussed when it comes to adolescent and teen violence and ideations of murder, including acts as heinous as school shootings, is violent media. This debate typically revolves around violent video gameplay in which the player engages in acts such as shooting, killing, car hijacking, and various other illegal activities via simulation that is acted out by an avatar, usually a male one. The gaming in question involves storylines, or a lack of, that use "human" targets for points, making the player excel in the game more by causing harm to the simulated humanoids. Outside of the context of abstract historical or fictional war games, the ethical concern of such gameplay is due to the role of the anti-hero that has become more popularized thanks to the introduction of Grand Theft Auto into the market.

Kurt Borchard's autoethnography studies two video games, one being GTA, a hyper-realistic game with graphics that resemble real cityscapes in which the character is to partake in illegal activity in order to score well, and the other a role-playing game centered around the true Columbine Massacre in 1999, in which the player reenacts the school shooting, following the lives and conversations assumed to have taken place between Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, and includes the killing of their classmates in a poor-quality pixelated graphics. The latter game expects the player to participate in the reenactment of these acts and to sympathize with the perpetrators.

The researcher explains that his experience playing the two violent games was vastly different. The so-called "anti-social actions" in video games such as GTA, Borchard explains are so abstract and free of consequence that they are relatively fun to live out in a virtual world that rewards such behavior. Meanwhile, he expressed that playing Super Columbine RPG! did not yield the same enjoyable gameplay experience. The research admits that although he was able to feel some amount of sympathy towards the characters that were meant to portray the lives and likenesses of Eric Haris and Dylan Klebold, the games violent actions *felt* as if the consequences of the simulated murder were real, as the game was based in a real historical event. "Here, the perversity and counterhegemonic meanings of the game become manifest. I am killing but not killing, present but absent, witnessing but not witnessing, responsible but not responsible,"(Borchard, 2015, p. 451).

In Borchard's examination of the video games Super Columbine RPG! and Grand Theft Auto, the sociologist had participated in the playing of over 100 hours of the games combined, details how these games operate on the human psyche and how they are to be perceived in a

cultural context. Both games glorify the role of the anti-hero to some degree. “Video games today have become social sense-making tools, spaces for defining and reproducing aspects of the world we might, or might not, want,” (Borchard, 2015, p. 453). By making this statement, it seems that Borchard believes that video games can act as a tool to formulate ideas about the gruesome thing one would like to do in the world, and on the other hand, make sense of gruesome things in the world that have already happened, perhaps as a way to cope or generate sympathy. Strangely enough, Borchard states he sympathizes with the video game characters backstories of Harris and Klebold being ruthlessly bullied in high school, which was a liberty taken by the game creator in order to make sense of the violent crime and its motive. He also mentions that each kill made in the game was coined “Another victory for the Trench Coat Mafia,” the group that neither Dylan nor Eric had been involved with.

Although there is limited evidence to suggest that video gaming has any significant effects on adolescent emotional control or that it explicitly leads to violence, the conversation proposed by Borchard poses an interesting angle; video games, much like novels, could be media that are utilized as virtual learning environments, or at the very least, that video gameplay, especially using a story mode setting, can help individuals work through real life tragedies or release tension. However, little is known on how this might affect populations struggling with mental illnesses, cognitive disorders, and those predisposed to violent, antisocial behaviors.

Critique

Despite notable correlations between video game violence and heinous acts of school-shooters, many scholars are quick to dispel myths regarding violent gameplay as causation for real-life criminal activity. According to a CBS news article that surfaced this

August, there currently is no link between video games and serious criminal violence. In a broadcast news segment displayed during lecture featuring Virginia Tech professor James Ivory, Ivory explains that due to the Base Rate Fallacy, certain factors such as whether a killer played video games become markers of mental illness and aggression, but instead are general shared traits among a particular, sometimes a broad demographic, rendering the attribution inaccurate. This means that, as an example, although a young white male might have played video games prior to attack, that same media is widely consumed by a large population of nonviolent, law-abiding young white males, who will not go on to commit such acts. Professor Ivory also notes that although video games are often brought up as a factor in news reports and speculations after an attack when a perpetrator is white, but there is no evidence to show that white people play more video games than people of color. “[Ivory] instead named several ‘strong predictors of violent crime,’ such as poverty, substance abuse and child abuse. ‘I think another reason we like point to video games is because we don't want to talk about other things that we know are much more likely to be relevant’,” (O’Kane, 2019).

Despite the unlikeliness of violent video games to be a primary cause for aggression and serious criminal offenses, there is still much to be studied concerning whether or not “glorification,” of violent actions and events in all forms of media whether in fictional video games, music, television shows, or nonfictional programming, documentary films, and newsreels displaying violent content has a serious negative effect on the human psyche. One thing that is known for sure is that due to the cultivation theory, this media shapes perceptions of the world in individual’s minds and such media, including depicting mass school shootings, or allusion to such crimes, is further refining and perpetuating the cultural script surrounding it.

Survey Findings and Discussion

The survey conducted was largely guided by statistics provided by Katsiyannis, Whitford, & Ennis (2018) in their historical analysis of the last two decades of mass school shootings.

What is your current grade?

118 responses

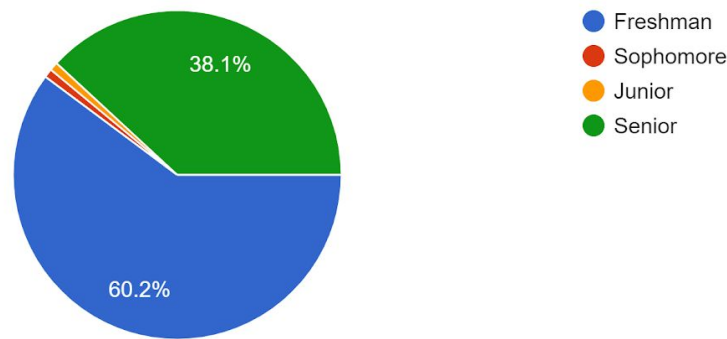


Figure 1: This survey was conducted with 118 Freshman and Senior English students at Liberty High School located in Bakersfield, California. Out of 120 asked to participate, only 2 did not give their consent on the consent form provided. Those two were removed from the data set. In total, 60.2% (71) of respondents were Freshman in the class of 2024 and 38.1% (45) of respondents were Seniors in the class of 2020. The remaining 2 respondents had been one Junior

and one Sophomore.

What is your gender?

118 responses

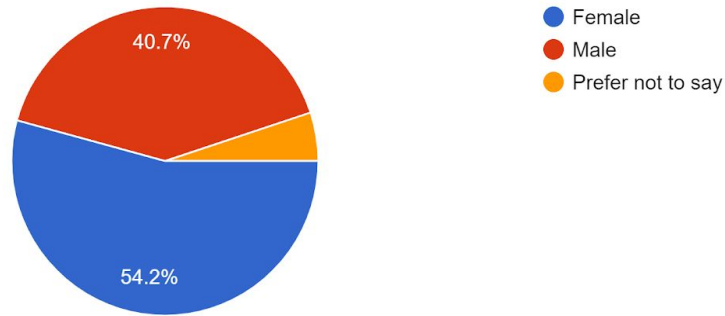


Figure 2: This chart represents respondents’ gender identity in order to capture accurate demographic information for this study.

Have you ever participated in a lockdown/active shooter drill?

118 responses

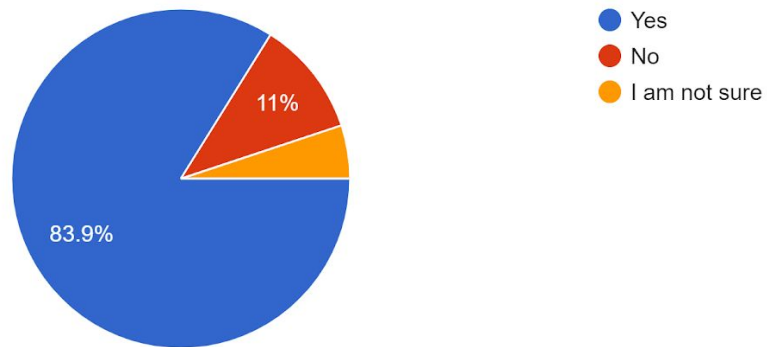


Figure 3: In order to better gauge the relevancy of mass school shootings as a topic amongst current high schoolers, this question was designed to reveal how many students had been prepped by the administration at their school for an active shooter drill, more commonly

referred to as a “lockdown” drills in which the students and faculty are to lock the doors, turn off the lights, close the blinds to the classrooms and are instructed to make little to no noise until given the all clear. A true “lockdown” at Liberty High School occurs if an armed person enters campus and/or if the surrounding areas or neighborhoods have given word of an active shooter that is not yet in custody. This may include gang violence circumstances. A stark majority of 83.9% (99) respondents answered yes, having before participated in an active shooter/lockdown drill.

Have you encountered any fictional works (i.e. Movies, Netflix shows, Video Games, songs or books) that have specifically referenced a school shooting incident?

118 responses

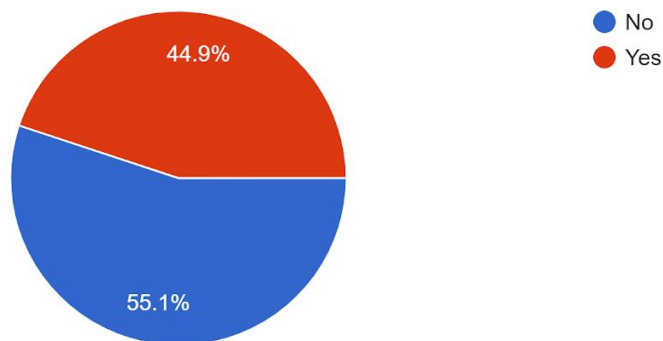


Figure 4: The majority of students 55.1% (65) answered “no” to having encountered fictional works referencing school shootings, leaving one to assume that their cultural scripts of such occurrences have been shaped entirely by nonfictional media and news sources, but a still statistically relevant number of students 44.9% (53) answered “yes,” most of which provided the specific titles they had encountered in the following optional question.

If yes, which ones?

48 responses

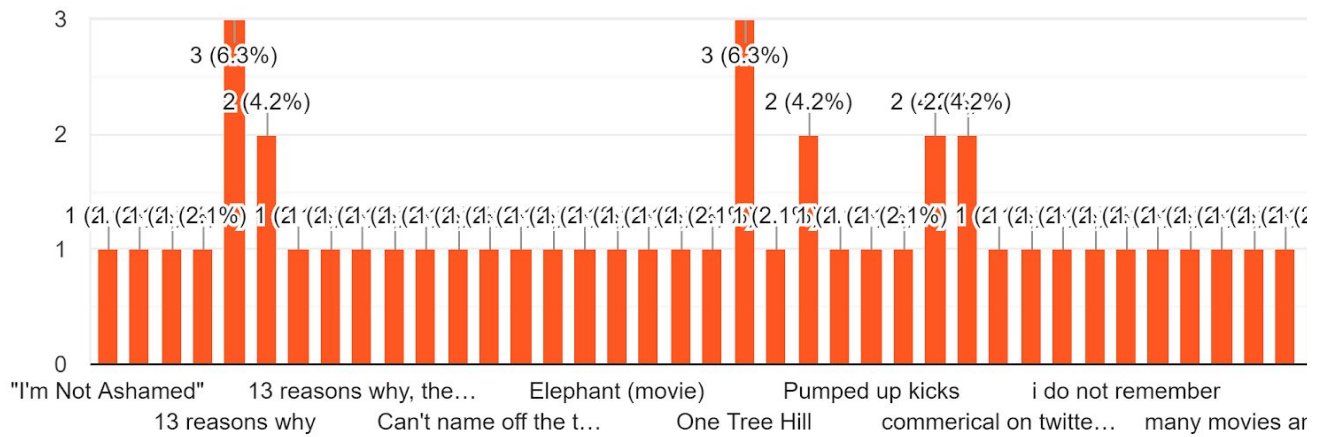


Figure 5: As an optional section to the question prior, students who could recall a specific fictional work that specifically referenced a school shooting incident left their comments individually. After accounting for differences in punctuation and spelling, the results are as follows:

Out of 48 responses, 27.3% of students responded with the Netflix television series *13 Reason Why*, as their first response, if answers were submitted as a series. 8.4% of students responded with the song “Pumped Up Kicks,” performed by the band Foster the People. 8.4% responded with the show *One Tree Hill* as their first response and likewise, 6.3% responded as *One Tree Hill* as their secondary response. 6.3% of students responded with the TV show *American Horror Story* as their only response. Additional responses were submitted by only one student each, including the video games Fortnite, Call of Duty: Modern Warfare, TV show *Glee*, and more. Lastly, 29.4% of students

responded that although they had encountered movies and tv shows that referenced school shootings but could not recall specific titles.

Between May 1940 and February 2018, approximately how many intentional mass school shootings do you think occurred?

118 responses

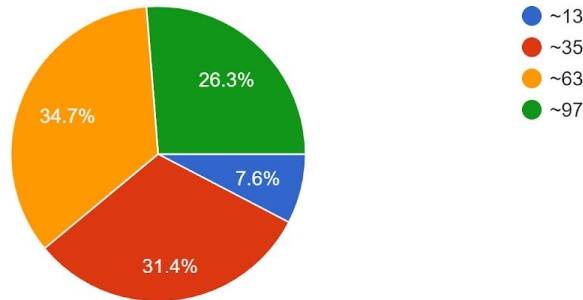


Figure 6: The correct answer to this question, according to the statistics provided by Katsiyannis, Whitford, & Ennis (2018) is: “35.” This was the second most selected answer by the respondents at 31.4% (35 votes). These answers followed suit to what was hypothesized for this study as the majority at 34.7% (41 votes) selected “63,” a number nearly twice as high as the true statistic.

Within this timeframe, how many of the shooters were female?

118 responses

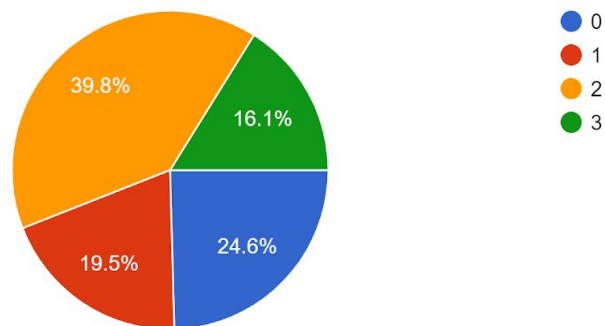


Figure 7: The correct answer to this question, according to the statistics provided by Katsiyannis, Whitford, & Ennis (2018) is: “3.” The correct response was least selected among respondents at 16.1% (19 votes). These answers followed suit to what was hypothesized for this study as the nature of this question directly challenges the current cultural script of the “bullied white *male*.” However, a disclaimer must be added that one of the three female perpetrators referenced was not acting alone, but acting with her husband in a hostage standoff at an elementary school on May 16, 1986 in Cokeville, WY after her husband was fired from his position as the town marshal (2018, p. 2567).

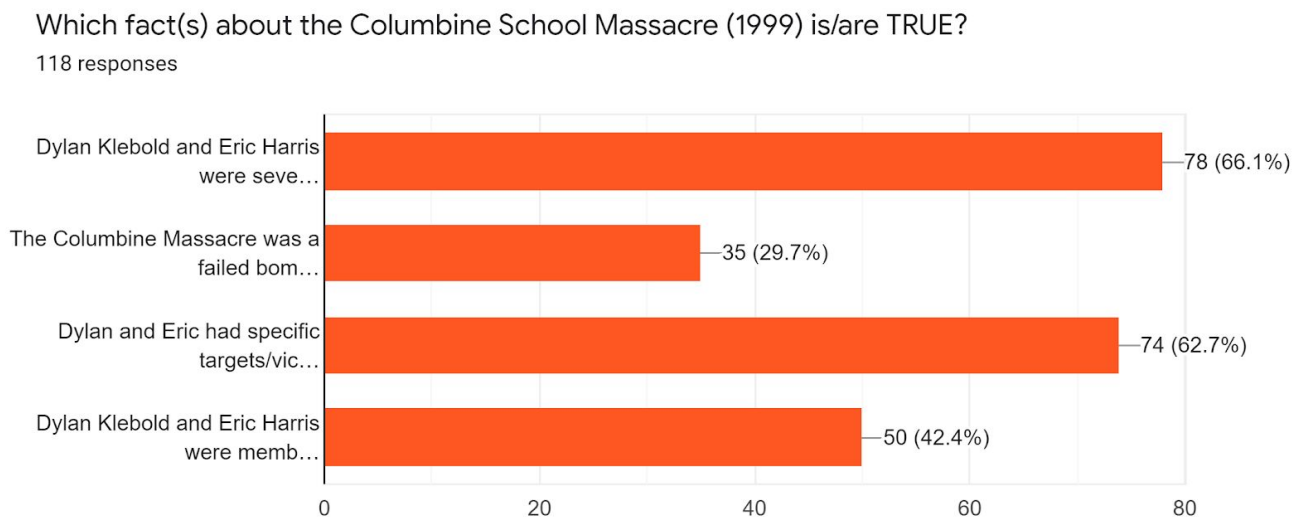


Figure 8: This graph represents the “facts” that students believe to be true about the 1999 Columbine Massacre. Only one in this set is a fact, the rest are myths that have since been perpetuated by inaccurate reportings and retellings of the Columbine Massacre. The choices are as follows:

1. Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris were severely bullied.

2. The Columbine Massacre was a failed bombing attack.
3. Dylan and Eric had specific targets/victims in mind for the attack.
4. Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris were members of the goth subculture and an organized gang called the "Trenchcoat Mafia."

As hypothesized, the least selected option, number 2, was the correct answer. This shows that an overwhelming majority of current high school students twenty years after the attack still do not know the full truth behind Columbine, the event that has so deeply influenced the cultural scripts held about mass school shootings in today's society.

What percentage of intentional mass school shootings between 1940-2018 were committed by white males?

118 responses

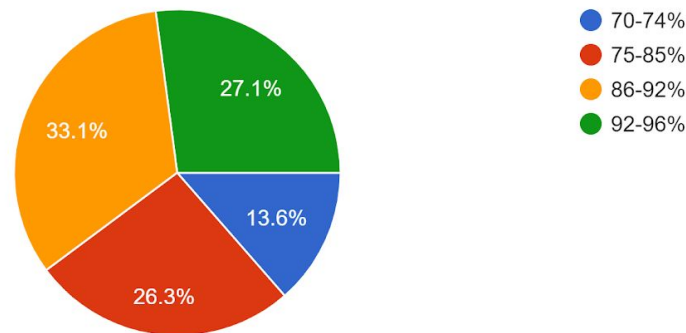


Figure 9: The correct answer to this question, according to the statistics provided by Katsiyannis, Whitford, & Ennis (2018) is: "75-85%."

These answers followed suit to what was hypothesized for this study as the overwhelming majority of mass school shootings are committed by this demographic. Due to the current news media breaking stories of shooters stating nonwhite races overtly in the headlines, it is assumed that current high school students might not assume the highest percentage for this

survey question, making the majority choice of “86-92%” the second highest percentage, though still incorrect.

What percentage of intentional mass school shooters between 1940-1999 do you think acted alone?
118 responses

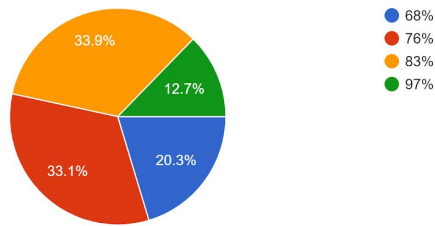


Figure 10: The correct answer to this question, according to the statistics provided by Katsiyannis, Whitford, & Ennis (2018) is: “76%.”

Exactly one-third of respondents selected for the correct answer, though a slightly higher majority at 33.9% (votes) incorrectly selected a higher percentage. As other survey questions apart from this one happen to specifically reference the Columbine Massacre, in which two perpetrators acted, this potentially has skewed answers towards a higher percentage, especial within this timeframe.

What percentage of intentional mass school shooters between 2000-2018 do you think acted alone?
118 responses

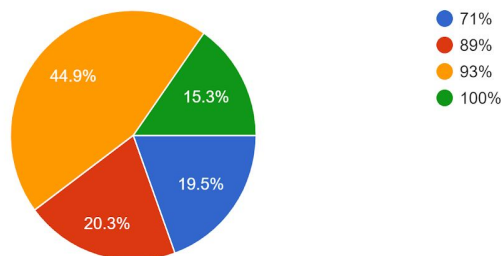


Figure 11: The correct answer to this question, according to the statistics provided by Katsiyannis, Whitford, & Ennis (2018) is: “100%.”

Surprisingly, these answers did not align with what was hypothesized for this study. In the millenia in which current high schoolers have been alive for, zero reports of a pair of shooters has emerged post-Columbine. However, this data does support the concept that Columbine has shaped what current students know and remember about mass shootings. Perhaps the imagery of a pair of shooters has simply become ingrained in the American perception of reality since the 1999 Massacre.

Do you believe violent video games, music, and entertainment are to blame for desensitization towards real-life violence?

118 responses

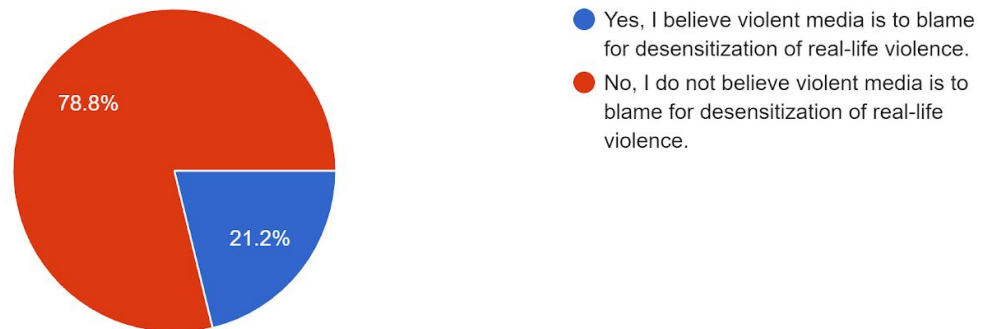


Figure 12: This figure represents the amount of respondents who felt that violent media, including video games are, or are not to blame for violent actions and desensitization to them. Less than one-third of respondents, 21.2% (25) argue “yes,” meaning that although the opinion is perhaps unpopular, there is still a significant conversation being held over whether or not these forms of media could potentially have an ill effect. The majority answer “no” with 78.8% (93) of respondents’ votes supports current research and data known about the topic.

Have you ever missed school for one or more days because you felt unsafe?

118 responses

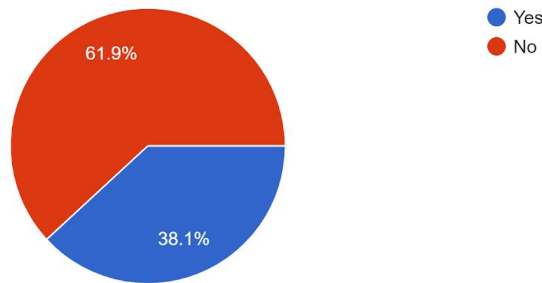


Figure 13: This chart represents the number of students who have or have not felt it necessary to miss school for one or more days due to feeling unsafe. Although the majority of respondents 61.9% (73) answered “no” having not missed school for this reason, an extremely statistically significant amount, over one-third, 38.1% (45) of high school students who participated in this survey have indeed missed school at least once for this very cause.

Concluding Remarks

It has become abundantly clear that Columbine, as a historical event and a current horror story continually gripping the nation, acts as the quintessential point in history for which individuals frame their perception of all other mass school shootings in both the past, present, and what is expected of the future. Through an extensive content analysis based on the splintering effect of the 1999 Columbine Massacre as well as through data collection from a detailed survey aimed to tackle the current-held perceptions of mass school shootings by current high school students, this conclusion has been drawn. 118 current high school students’ responses revealed that according to the hypothesis of this study, various misconceptions about

mass school shootings are prominent among America's youth and have a significant effect on how they perceive the world about them and their safety as a result. This study revealed that a majority of students could not identify one correct fact about the Columbine Massacre when weighed with its most popular myths, and perhaps most shockingly, that a statistically significant percentage of students, over one-third of those surveyed have missed one or more school days due to feeling unsafe on their campus. Although 44.9% of students surveyed believed they had encountered media that specifically depicted a school shooting incident in some form, an overwhelming majority of students do not believe that violent media has any effect on desensitization to violence. This result was in accordance with the critique of this study, that violent media should not be held as a contributing factor to violent crime, as there is still very little evidence to suggest this. Additionally, the typical cultural script held for mass school shootings does have a significant effect on the respondents surveyed, who attribute a higher percentage of these crimes to white males than is factually supported; this also confirmed the hypothesis for this study.

Overall, survey questions that challenged the typical cultural script held about mass school shootings and more specifically, the 1999 Columbine School Massacre, yielded the incorrect responses. This serves as evidence that the narrative of Columbine, even its inaccurate "facts" have had a significant effect on the cultural scripts held today towards school shootings, and that these scripts are the main reference point for which current high school students form their perceptions about such events, the narratives surrounding them, and their own, personal safety at school.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol and Survey Copy

The Splintering Influence of Columbine

By participating in this study, you are consenting to help the researcher determine the perception of mass school shootings by current high school students. The questions in this study revolve around incidents that occurred between May 1940 and February 2018 on K-12 campuses in the United States perpetrated by adolescents and adults. The study excludes events on college campuses and organized gang shootings. Events regarded as intentional mass school shootings are the basis of this study; mass murders are classified as the killing of 4 or more individuals in the same incident (FBI, 2005). Some of these questions may be graphic in nature, but no stress is foreseen on behalf of the participants.

* Required

Consent Form

I agree to participate in the study "The Splintering Influence of Columbine: An Application of Cultural Scripts and Current Public Perception of Mass School Shootings" which is being conducted by Taylyn Cogswell, an undergraduate student at Boise State University. I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary, therefore I can refuse to participate or withdraw my consent at any time without penalty and have the results of the participation, to the extent that it can be identified as mine, returned to me, removed from the research records, or destroyed.

It has been explained to me that the goal of this research is to investigate the perception of and myths regarding the splintering effect of the Columbine Massacre in today's high school student population. I understand that my part in the study will last approximately 10 to 15 minutes and that my responses will be kept confidential. I have been told that although neither discomfort nor stress is foreseen, some topics might be of a graphic nature. I further understand that my participation in this research is completely confidential and that results will not be released in any individually identifiable form without my prior consent unless otherwise required by law.

Participating in this research will give me a good chance to reflect on my own perception of school safety and media literacy. Through answering each question, I will have an opportunity to analyze my own situations and hopefully to think about the possible ways to more effectively deal with the related issues. The researcher will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the course of the project, and can be reached at (861-599-7094). I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study.

1. I agree to participate in this study *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
 No

2. What is your current grade? *

Mark only one oval.

- Freshman
 Sophomore
 Junior
 Senior

3. What is your gender? *

Mark only one oval.

- Female
 Male
 Prefer not to say

4. Have you ever participated in a lockdown/active shooter drill? *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
 No
 I am not sure

5. Have you encountered any fictional works (i.e. Movies, Netflix shows, Video Games, songs or books) that have specifically referenced a school shooting incident? *

Mark only one oval.

- No
 Yes

6. If yes, which ones?

7. Between May 1940 and February 2018, approximately how many intentional mass school shootings do you think occurred? *

Mark only one oval.

- ~13
 ~35
 ~63
 ~97

8. Within this timeframe, how many of the shooters were female? *

Mark only one oval.

- 0
 1
 2
 3

9. Which fact(s) about the Columbine School Massacre (1999) is/are TRUE? *

Check all that apply.

- Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris were severely bullied
- The Columbine Massacre was a failed bombing attack
- Dylan and Eric had specific targets/victims in mind for the attack
- Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris were members of the goth subculture and an organized gang called the "Trenchcoat Mafia"

10. What percentage of intentional mass school shootings between 1940-2018 were committed by white males? *

Mark only one oval.

- 70-74%
- 75-85%
- 86-92%
- 92-96%

11. What percentage of intentional mass school shooters between 1940-1999 do you think acted alone? *

Mark only one oval.

- 68%
- 76%
- 83%
- 97%

12. What percentage of intentional mass school shooters between 2000-2018 do you think acted alone? *

Mark only one oval.

- 71%
- 89%
- 93%
- 100%

13. Do you believe violent video games, music, and entertainment are to blame for desensitization towards real-life violence? *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes, I believe violent media is to blame for desensitization of real-life violence.
- No, I do not believe violent media is to blame for desensitization of real-life violence.

14. Have you ever missed school for one or more days because you felt unsafe? *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No

