Media Constructions of Identity Theft

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In recent years identity theft has established itself in the ethos of the digital age. Even so, scholarship toward identity theft in general is strikingly limited. This work fills a gap by addressing the style, substance, and focus of the media representation of identity theft via a content analysis of a nationally representative sample of offender focused newspaper articles from 1995-2005. The findings suggest that the media represent identity theft through scornful remarks, general astonishment with victimization, alarm due to the ease of offending through the use of technology, and by suggesting that identity theft is an unstoppable problem. Discourse on the relationship between this new form of criminality and the media is provided and direction for future research is suggested.

INTRODUCTION

Identity theft has become a considerable problem in a very short amount of time. Prior to the turn of the 21st century, identity theft was a little discussed phenomenon, however, research findings suggest that 3.6 million U.S. households were victimized in 2004 alone (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2006). Another study conducted by the Javelin Strategy and Research Group suggests that costs resulting from identity theft in 2005 were over fifty billion dollars and over 9.3 million Americans were victimized. Along with the surge in reported victimization, the media has directed focus on covering many components of this form of crime. Today, a simple Google™ online search using the term "identity theft" can result in tens of millions of hits ranging from links to governmental victims assistance websites and victim advocacy groups to commercial links selling identity theft insurance for a monthly fee. One might be inclined to think that with the seemingly high prevalence of media attention given to identity theft that research focusing on the problem would have followed suit; unfortunately this is not the case. As shown below, the media present identity theft cases alongside several overlapping themes including scorn, shock, marvel from the use of technology, and identity theft as an unstoppable problem. This research presents a first step toward systematically exploring the media portrayal of identity theft in the United States.

Exploring how the media present identity theft to the public is important to our understanding of identity theft for several reasons. First, the exploration of identity theft offenders and victims is not only problematic, but traditional data sources may be more biased for identity theft than for conventional crimes (e.g., index crimes), thereby limiting what is known about the problem. For example, findings from victim reports of identity theft are easily argued as under-representations of the reality of the problem. This is, in part, due to many identity theft victims not realizing that they have been victimized until a considerable amount of time after the event has occurred (Morris, Kercher, and Johnson, 2006). Second, the nature of identity theft in general has fogged official classification, investigation, and criminal sanctioning of offenders, making the use of official data (i.e., arrest and court records) problematic. For the purposes of the present research, this dynamic has been termed *ambiguous criminal justice attenuation/classification*. This concept is based on the idea that the criminal justice process has had to adapt to identity theft as a new form of criminality. This has been due both to the trans-jurisdictional nature of identity theft as well as to legislation that has yet to provide clear guidelines for handling identity theft at every level of the criminal justice system. Identity theft is a complex offense from a criminal justice perspective.

In general, criminal justice agencies do not seem to have a formalized definition of identity theft and are often forced to classify identity theft offenses as varying conventional offenses (some old and some new) that may fall under the umbrella of identity theft.[1] Thus, to follow through with the sanctioning of identity theft offenders, prosecutors may file charges under pre-existing definitions such as credit card fraud, check fraud, or false impersonation, for example; all of which are charges that could be used for non-identity theft offenses. This reality only provides a mosaic of how the criminal justice system responds to identity theft, which is certainly part of the reason behind the scant amount of related scholarship. To complicate matters more, many identity theft victims do not report their victimization to law enforcement agencies, they may only report to their financial institution, and often are unaware of who the perpetrator might be (Morris, Kercher and Johnson, 2006; Newman and McNally, 2005).[2] This aspect is not altogether surprising considering that victims may be more interested in repairing their financial problems rather than seeking justice for an ambiguous thief. Third, the dynamics of many identity theft occurrences have tested the limits of investigation and prosecution of these crimes. This is due to the trans-jurisdictional nature of identity theft which has minimized the risk of capture for offenders, thus to some extent invalidating research that has been based on case studies of specific agencies in limited jurisdictions.

Fortunately, there is at least one viable data source that is not subject to *ambiguous criminal justice attenuation/classification*, under-reporting, or other trans-jurisdictional technicalities. That outlet is the news media which has provided a means to explore one component of identity theft in a valid manner – media constructions of identity theft. This is a very important realization at present due to the limitations on what we know about identity theft in general. Beyond relying on the media as an exploratory pointer of how we communicate the features and styles of identity theft offending, this outlet offers a glimpse at the social perception of identity theft and raises many questions about how we should respond to this new problem. This work fills a gap in the literature by addressing some of these questions. Specifically, the purpose of this research is to explore how the media portray identity theft and how the media

have characterized identity theft offenders and offenses over the past several years. However, some general information about identity theft should be presented beforehand.

Defining Identity Theft

Governmental responses to identity theft and measures taken to alert citizens about their vulnerability to identity theft have been extremely vigorous in recent years (Newman and McNally, 2005). However, our understanding of this phenomenon is limited. It is argued herein that a critical understanding of how we communicate to one another the problem and how we officially and unofficially define identity theft are both important dimensions of the phenomenon that deserve exploration. As a result of the Identity Theft Assumption and Deterrence Act of 1998 (ITADA), the U.S. Government defines the act of identity theft as:

> Knowingly transfer[ing] or us[ing], without lawful authority, any name or number that may be used, alone or in conjunction with any other information, to identity a specific individual with the intent to commit, or to aid or abet, any unlawful activity that constitutes a violation of Federal Law, or that constitutes a felony under any applicable State or local law (U.S. Public Law 105-318).

Clearly, this definition is very broad and encompasses many pre-existing forms of criminal activity that were simply varying individual types of crime until 1998 (at least at the U.S. federal level). Further, this definition may be one reason why there is so much variation among state and local level definitions of identity theft and in turn why official data on identity theft is limited.

Although many different forms and methods of criminality fall under the umbrella of identity theft, as noted by Newman and McNally (2005, p. iv), it is typically composed of any, or a combination of the following forms of criminal behavior:

> ...check fraud, plastic card fraud (credit cards, check cards, debit cards, phone cards etc.), immigration fraud, counterfeiting, forgery, terrorism using false or stolen information, theft of various kinds (pick pocketing, robbery, burglary or mugging to obtain the victim's personal information), postal fraud, and many others.[3]

Additionally, identity theft can consist of various forms of computer crime, telemarketing scams, bank fraud, and it may also play a role in human trafficking (Newman and McNally, 2005; U.S. Department of Justice, 2004).[4]

The ITADA was developed primarily to put a definition on the construct of identity theft and to aide prosecutors in the conviction of captured offenders at the federal level, however, the umbrella that was created (i.e., encompassing so many forms of preexisting crimes) has debilitated the generation of realistically obtainable official records to begin an exploration of offender characteristics and criminal justice response. Newman and McNally (2005) have suggested that research should focus on each individual type of identity theft (e.g., check fraud that is in fact identity theft) rather than attempt to understand, or empirically assess, identity theft as a solitary construct or singular phenomenon. However, developing such research would require considerable time, resources, inter-agency communication, records standardization, and

the acceptance of common definitions which is not currently feasible. This is an issue for which Newman and McNally agree, making their suggestions for future research confusing. This point is made here because a crime that falls underneath the identity theft umbrella (e.g., check fraud) can occur in separate instances as an identity theft offense or as a non-identity theft offense, depending on whether the criminal is using their own personal information or someone else's. This is one of the primary reasons why so little attention has been given to identity theft by the academic community. Accordingly, the conceptualization of identity theft for the purposes of this study was based on the common or publicly accepted understanding of the phenomenon which, to the lay person, may arguably be viewed as a single issue or solitary construct, rather than a multifaceted and dynamic genre of criminality. The definition used here coincides with the federal definition of identity theft as noted in the ITADA discussed above.

Scholarship and Identity Theft

Scholarship focusing on identity theft is quite limited at present. This fact raises concern given the attention that the government, the media, and the private financial sectors have recently devoted to the problem. Studies to date that have focused on identity theft are limited to but a handful of peer reviewed journal articles; however they are problematic with regard to external validly due to sampling and reliability issues (see Sharp, Shreve-Neiger, Fremouw, Kane, and Hutton, 2004; see also Allison, Schuck, and Lersch, 2005). Again, the purpose of this paper is not necessarily directed at specific crimes that encompass identity theft in an individualistic sense, each of those acts can take place and not be considered identity theft under different circumstances. Rather, the purpose here is to gain a better understanding of the media's portrayal of identity theft, an area that has not been previously explored.

Interpreting what is presented by the news media about crime and criminal behavior is not a new area of study, and much work has been developed using this source of information as a basis for analysis, both qualitative and quantitative (see Jewkes, 2004; Surette, 2006). For some time, researchers studying the dynamics between crime and the media have focused on crimes that may be overly prone to sensationalism by the media and how such actions by the media may lead to moral panics, ultimately creating social fear where it really should not (Cherbonneau and Copes, 2003; Chermak, 1997; Chermak and Gruenewald, 2006; Colomb and Damphouse, 2004; Paulsen, 2003; Sorenson, Manz and Berk, 1998; Weiss and Chermak, 1998). However, attention toward fraud/white-collar crimes by the media has been slow in development (Levi, 2006). A divergence from this trend in the study of crime and the media is in part what makes this project unique. Additionally, no work to date has studied the crime of identity theft using news articles as data, nor has any research been conducted which attempts to better understand the forms of identity theft that are being presented by the media.

Several research studies, such as those noted above, have focused on crime presented by the media while simultaneously having the luxury of being able to compare what is reported against official arrest data for a particular geographical area. Such methods are especially valid for studying homicide and/or terrorism under the assumption that most homicides, or other cases involving the death of victims, especially those with multiple victims, are more likely to be reported to the authorities and in turn more accurately reflected by official criminal justice statistics (Chermak and Gruenewald, 2006; Johnstone, Hawkins, and Minchener, 1994; Paulsen, 2003; Pritchard and Hughes, 1997; Sorenson, Manz, and Berk, 1998; Wilbanks, 1994).

Unfortunately, for reasons argued above, official records of identity theft offenses are not presently attainable and are likely to have validity issues. The presence of identity theft in news paper reports does however provide enough information to allow for a worthy research application, especially for exploratory and investigative purposes. Thus, the foundation of this project was to explore the parameters of how identity theft is portrayed by the news media.

Research Problem

Two research questions were addressed here. First was the question of whether there are any discernable media "tones" that are consistently represented in news articles addressing identity theft and its offenders. Second, are any differences in media tones characterized by different offender/offense characteristics?

The data coding procedure provided for a means to address each question. Media tones were not preconceived. It was only through the open coding process and immersion in the news articles that certain tone characteristics began to reoccur and ultimately evolved into separate themes (see Altheide, 1996; Berg, 2004). Validity precautions were taken to limit potential biases in the qualitative coding component of this research. Both of these issues are discussed below.

METHOD

The data used to explore media constructions of identity theft stemmed from American newspaper articles published from 1995-2005. The articles were collected through the utilization of the LexisNexis™ newspaper database. This tool allows for searches of news articles to be conducted based on 771 different English speaking newspapers in the USA. In order to provide an opportunity for a broad spectrum of identity theft offenders and offenses to be included in the sample, the first of three selection criteria was left very general. The first step involved the establishment of specific key words to be used as search terms in the LexisNexis database. The search terms were limited to a) identity theft; b) identity fraud; and c) identity thief. In order for a case (article) to be eligible for inclusion in the dataset, it had to meet two other specific criteria in addition to be generated by the search. The second criteria verified that articles were specifically directed toward an identity theft offender or group of offenders. This was done visually. The third prerequisite was that each article had to include a minimum of three manifest codes (e.g., offender age, charge type, and offender gender). Articles that did not meet these criteria were not included in the analysis. The data gathering process resulted in a large number of cases meeting the first two eligibility criteria (i.e., were generated by the search and verified to be focused on an identity theft offense). However, due limits on time, a random sample of 300 articles was drawn from about 1500 articles. Of the sample, 257 were eligible for analysis.[5]

Coding

Along with a variety of manifest level variables that were rather straightforward, a series of latent media themes were identified and recorded. These latent media constructs (themes) are the founding component of this piece; however, it is important to briefly discuss the method by which the qualitative media codes were developed and substantiated for the purpose of enhanced reliability and validity.

The development of media themes was carried out with the understanding that this project was exploratory. Thus, the goal was to attempt to be as objective as possible during theme development. This qualitative component was conducted in an iterative manner beginning with the initial screening of the articles for potential inclusion in the dataset. This allowed for the removal of unrelated articles that were generated by the keyword search but did not represent a unique case of identity theft. The second phase was directed at coding manifest level data such as offender and offense demographics that would clearly be of importance to the research. It was in this phase that the varying media tones began to appear (this process is commonly referred to as open coding; see Abrahamson, 1983; Altheide, 1996; Berg, 2004). This process led to the development of many different codes that served as the basis (i.e., indicators) of nine distinct media themes (presented below); each theme was developed from the qualitative interpretation of how the media characterizes identity theft offenders and their offenses as reported by the news media. For example, scornful comments toward identity theft offenders became apparent relatively quickly. This led to the systematic development of manifest codes that were deemed representative of scornful comments in general (see Table 1).

By becoming increasingly intimate with the data through the open coding process, other themes began to materialize. Once this occurred, manifest codes were developed that could be systematically drawn from the data to represent the qualitatively developed constructs simultaneously. Ultimately, what appears in Table 1 is the end result of several qualitatively identified constructs that have been quantified (i.e., redefined for numerical measurement) for the purposes of this project (see Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998). Thus, the foundation of this research follows a mixed methods approach. While it may be impossible to be fully objective in qualitative theme development, effort was made by the researcher to remain unbiased in the coding process. This was carried out by the researcher making a conscious effort to remain objective and by developing a coding process that could be followed by secondary coders and future researchers.

Reliability and Validity

The notions of validity and reliability are of great importance in content analysis. However, the latent aspect of content analysis should be subject to strict scrutiny with regard to reliability and validity (Weber, 1990). Several techniques are available to the researcher to aid in strengthening both reliability and validity when using content analytic procedures. To enhance the reliability of the coding procedure, a random sub-sample of articles was re-coded over two months after the original data coding procedure was completed (the test-retest method). There were no discrepancies found through this process. To enhance reliability and validity of the measures used for analysis, a secondary coder was used. After being trained on the coding procedure, the second coder recoded the same random sub-sample of articles (36 cases). Again, there were no disagreements with regard to the manifest content of the data. For the latent component of the coding process, the secondary coder was provided with a breakdown of codes for each theme (similar to what is presented in Table 1) and used that structure to record the data. To assess agreement between coders across the latent categories, both proportions of agreement for each theme along with Cronbach's alpha statistics were used. The mean level of coder agreement across themes was 90.1% and ranged from 78.3% to 100%. The Cronbach's statistics used to rate coder agreement were all acceptable.[6]

LATENT MEDIA CONSTRUCTIONS OF IDENTITY THEFT

This section outlines the representation of several latent media constructs that were identified. In all, nine distinct categories were developed. While each category is not mutually exclusive, four of the nine categories represent the vast majority of cases that were found to have a discernable tone. It should be noted that many cases were represented by multiple themes. These four main themes were identified as scornful, shocking, technologically marvelous, and identity theft as an unstoppable problem. The less represented themes included the government having the identity theft problem under control; sensitivity toward the victim; an overt focus on the penalties handed down to offenders; sensitivity toward the offender; and an overt focus on potential outcomes of corporate victimization (e.g., increased prices). Of the 257 articles in the sample, about 14% were void of any media tone and were termed "dry" articles. Table 1 outlines each theme's structural components. In other words, Table 1 defines each theme's representation in the sample along with the respective indicators (codes) that were identified to symbolize each theme. An article only had to be represented by one indicator of a particular theme to be classified as endorsing that theme. Due to space limitations, only the four major themes will be discussed in further detail here.

Table 1: Media Themes Broken Down by Specific Indicators

Theme (n=257)	n	% of Valid Cases	% of Articles with Tone
Scorn toward Offender	**77**	**30.0%**	**34.8%**
Vulnerable target highlighted	42	16.3%	19.0%
Name calling	16	6.2%	7.2%
Verbal scorn by judge	13	5.1%	5.9%
Verbal scorn by victim	11	4.3%	5.0%
Vanity of offender	10	3.9%	4.5%
Repeat criminality	3	1.2%	1.4%
Shock and Astonishment	**69**	**26.8%**	**31.2%**
Law Enforcement impressed	26	10.1%	11.8%
Offense magnitude emphasized	23	8.9%	10.4%
Criminal genius	7	2.7%	3.2%
Tactics Sensationalized	7	2.7%	3.2%
Youthfulness highlighted	4	1.6%	1.8%
Technological Marvel	**41**	**16.0%**	**18.6%**
Internet paved the way	25	9.7%	11.3%
Computer equipment paved the way	20	7.8%	9.0%

Table 1: Media Themes Broken Down by Specific Indicators (Cont)

Theme (n=257)	n	% of Valid Cases	% of Articles with Tone
Nobody is safe	16	6.2%	7.2%
Law enforcement surprised	14	5.4%	6.3%
Motive unknown by Govt.	7	2.7%	3.2%
ID Theft is the fastest growing crime	6	2.3%	2.7%
Govt. in Control	**17**	**6.6%**	**7.7%**
Self praise by police for capture	14	5.4%	6.3%
Interagency Cooperation	3	1.2%	1.4%
The system always wins	1	0.4%	0.5%
Sensitive toward Victim	**16**	**6.2%**	**7.2%**
Proactive Recommendations	12	4.7%	5.4%
Victim fear/stress highlighted	4	1.6%	1.8%
Focus on Penalties	**15**	**5.8%**	**6.8%**
Too harsh	13	5.1%	5.9%
Too light	3	1.2%	1.4%
Sensitive toward Offender	**10**	**3.9%**	**4.5%**
Offender apologetic	5	1.9%	2.3%
Offender repair	4	1.6%	1.8%
Offender should be excused	1	0.4%	0.5%
Corporation as Victim	**8**	**3.1%**	**3.6%**

Note: Summed indicators do not match category totals due to cases represented by multiple indicators.

Table 2: Offender and Offense Characteristics

Characteristic	N	Scornful Remarks	Media Shock	Technological Marvel	Unstoppable Problem
Total Sample	**257**	**29.9%**	**26.8%**	**16.0%**	**15.2%**
Age					
Under 30	92	21.7*	28.8	18.5	15.4
Over 30	149	33.6	25.0	13.4	15.2
Gender					
Male	172	28.5	29.6	17.4	18.6*
Female	83	33.7	21.7	12.1	8.4
Median # of Words					
Above	108	29.6	49.1*	20.4*	25.9*
Below	149	30.2	10.7	12.8	7.4
Digitally Enhanced					
Yes	82	25.6	31.7	36.6*	13.4
No	173	32.4	24.9	6.4	16.2
ID Theft Ring					
Yes	53	29.9	49.1*	18.9	13.2
No	201	26.4	19.9	15.4	15.9
Vulnerable Target					
Yes	86	50.0*	27.9	15.1	15.1
No	171	19.9	26.3	16.4	15.2

In response to the second research question for this project, the four main themes were cross-tabulated against several characteristics that were widely represented in the sample (see Table 2). Offender and offense characteristics include the age of the offender(s) (coded dichotomously as above or below the age of 30); gender; whether the number of words in the case was above or below the median number of words (304 words); whether the crime was noted to be digitally enhanced in some way (via the use of computer technology and etc.); whether the offender was noted as being part of an identity theft ring; whether the target could be considered overtly vulnerable (i.e., elderly victim; access to data from legitimate job; an environment with floating identity information). Media themes were also cross tabulated against varying levels of offender sophistication (circumstantial, general, sophisticated, and highly sophisticated). These data are presented in Table 3.[7] Many other offender/offense characteristics were identified in the sample, but not in great consistency. Thus, they were not analyzed in detail for these purposes. *Pearson chi square* tests for statistically significant differences were conducted and are presented

alongside media theme representation in the following section. Note that the statistics presented in Table 2 for each theme represent the proportion of cases per characteristic that were identified as representing a particular theme (e.g., 21.7% of offenders under the age of 30 were represented by scornful remarks).[8]

Table 3: Cross-tabulation of Offender Characteristics and Media Themes

Characteristic	N	Scornful Remarks	Media Shock	Technological Marvel	Unstoppable Problem
Circumstantial					
Yes	42	30.9	2.3*	0.0*	4.8*
No	215	29.7	31.6	19.1	17.2
General					
Yes	134	30.1	23.8	14.9	15.7
No	123	29.3	30.1	17.1	14.6
Sophisticated					
Yes	64	23.4	39.1*	23.4†	17.2
No	193	32.1	22.8	13.5	14.5
Highly Sophisticated					
Yes	15	46.6	73.3*	40.0*	33.3*
No	242	28.9	23.9	14.5	14.1

*Significant at $p < .05$; †Significant at $p \leq .10$

Scornful Remarks toward the Offender/s

In many cases, offenders were described with language that was represented by scornful remarks or general disgust for their supposed criminal actions. Such remarks were made by every possible party involved in the communication process other than by the offender. In other words, scornful statements were made by judges, district attorneys, law enforcement personnel, the victim/s, and/or from the journalist writing the article. Much of what was noted with regard to media scorn is characterized by offender name calling. In these cases, the article would refer to the offender in a derogatory manner (e.g., a "crook", an "old con" or "internet bandit"). Other scornful comments were made in regard to the supposed lavish spending habits of the offender as a result of the bounty that s/he had acquired via identity theft (i.e., offender vanity). However, a more common form of scornful media tone came in response to victim vulnerability. As shown in Table 1, many scornful comments were founded on victim vulnerability (42 of 77). Vulnerability scorn came in the form of disparagement toward the offender for taking advantage of a handicap person or violating trust from an employment position where sensitive records could be easily and legitimately accessed. Additionally, the media often portrayed offenders with scorn also for victimizing a close friend or immediate family member.

Of all non-dry articles, 30% were represented by media scorn, which makes it the most prevalent media tone found in the sample. Only two statistically significant differences were found between groups among the ten offender/offense categories. The difference in age of the

offender (coded dichotomously as either above (1) or below (0) the age of thirty) was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 3.85$, $p < .05$) as well as whether the target was identified as vulnerable ($\chi^2 = 24.7$, $p < .001$). Regarding vulnerability, articles that presented an incident where the target was overtly vulnerable were more likely to be classified by the scornful theme. Regarding vulnerability, articles that presented an incident where the target was overtly vulnerable were proportionally more likely to be classified by the scornful theme.

Shocked by the Offense and Media Astonishment

The second most prevalent media tone that was uncovered in the analysis was that of general shock, surprise, or displayed astonishment that the event took place. This element is referred to as shock from here out. This shock was demonstrated through the representation of comments or dialog that reflected shock, surprise, or astonishment from the journalist, the victim, or a representative of the criminal justice system. This could include an overt emphasis on the dollar amount lost through the crime; a law enforcement official who was impressed by the tactics or cunning of the offender's technique; an emphasis on a youthful or savvy identity theft offender; or by emphasizing surprise at the sheer number of individuals victimized by one offender or group of offenders. If an article was found to entail any aspect of those mentioned, then it was classified as endorsing the shock theme. Of all articles (offenders) in the sample, 26.8% were found to fall under the shock category while this theme represented 31.2% of articles that were non-dry.

Of the ten offender/article characteristics, five were found to have statistically significant differences between offender characteristics and whether the article met the shock thematic threshold. Articles having a number of words greater than the median (304 words) were more likely to be classified by the shock theme. About half of the articles that suggested an identity theft ring was responsible were more likely to lead to the shock tone ($\chi^2 = 18.54$, $p < .01$). Lastly, being represented by any sophistication level other than that of the general category ($\chi^2 = 15.30$, $p < .01$; $\chi^2 = 6.47$, $p < .01$; $\chi^2 = 17.52$, $p < .001$; for circumstantial, sophisticated, and highly sophisticated identity theft, respectively), were each found to have statistically significant differences between their respective categories (i.e., whether or not the article was represented by the characteristic). These findings are not altogether surprising in that each of them represent categories that may be more sensational. Identity theft rings and any sophistication level other than the most common sophistication level (general identity theft) may also be represented by increased sensationalism and provide for a more interesting storyline.

Technological Marvel

It was common for the media to emphasize the role of technology respective to cases of identity theft that were based on such tools. In several cases, the success of the offense was argued to be dependent on technology. In these cases, the use of the internet or the use of sophisticated computer aided printing equipment facilitating the development of realistic looking identification cards or working credit cards along with computer based credit card readers/writers (card reprogramming). In other words, there was an emphasis on the idea that the crime would not have been a success without the tools of the internet and/or computer related hardware or that the technological aspect was a focal point of the news article.

The technologically assisted theme ranked third with respect to all articles in the sample. As shown in Tables 1 through 3, sixteen percent of all cases were flagged as having a media tone of technological marvel. This theme also ranked third with respect to "non-dry" articles (18.6%). Article length (number of words) plays a moderately significant role in whether the article was classified as technologically marvelous ($\chi^2 = 2.71$, $p < .10$). As expected, the difference between whether or not the offender utilized some form of digital technology was also found to be statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 37.67$, $p < .001$). Not a single case that was represented by circumstantial identity theft was found to endorse the technological marvel theme, which aides in establishing the validity of the sophistication categories. Significant findings for the more sophisticated levels of identity theft were not surprising. The higher order offenders represented in the sample were more likely to utilize technology for their crimes which is required to be classified by this particular theme.

Identity Theft as an Unstoppable Problem

Several articles represented a theme of media communication that seemed to be based on the idea that identity theft cannot be stopped. In other words, such articles lean toward an indication that no person is safe from victimization; identity theft is the fastest growing crime in America; and that the problem is so bad that authorities cannot seem to figure out how many of these "crooks" are getting away with it. Of all articles that were found to have a media tone, 15.2% were represented by the unstoppable problem theme. A statistically significant difference was found between the offender's gender and whether the unstoppable theme was apparent ($\chi^2 = 4.47$, $p < .05$). Articles with male offenders were proportionally more likely to be classified as endorsing this theme. The number of words also plays a significant role for this theme ($\chi^2 = 16.72$, $p < .001$) along with those offenders who make up the highly sophisticated category ($\chi^2 = 10.36$, $p < .05$). These findings suggest that journalists may devote more attention to a case of identity theft when the tone of the article can be classified as an unstoppable problem. Further, highly sophisticated offenders were much more likely to be identified by this theme, although this was not all too surprising.

Limitations

The main limitation of the design chosen here is the level of data used for the analysis. This study was limited to newspaper articles that address specific suspected identity theft offenders. At its most basic level, the analysis was subject to the accuracy of the news media's representation of the actual offense and offender. This is a potential limitation in all secondary data analyses. Additionally, the data were gathered electronically. Had the data been gathered from photo copied or original news articles, other important qualitative characteristics may have been accounted for such as photos, article placement, and/or headline presentation.

Another possible limitation involves the ideological direction of the news-reporting agency. Media corporations may select certain stories for publication to enhance the sell-ability of their product, leading to an inaccurate portrayal of reality. This factor may often be coupled with the potential for high profile cases being overrepresented in the sample, as it is unlikely that the more common forms of identity theft offenders would make for interesting news. To counter this potential limitation, broad key terms were used to generate the sample in hopes of including a broad array of cases. High profile cases were in fact a much smaller proportion of the cases compared to low-level offenders/offenses. Additionally, official sources were not consulted to

verify the content and claims made in the articles (cases). This would be a strong topic for future research and would certainly substantiate the findings here; however, such was outside of the scope of this project.

Although these limitations may pose a risk to the validity of the findings, the reality is that there is not a practical source of identity theft offender data presently available other than that presented by the news media. This exploratory study allows for the first in-depth examination of identity theft offenders at the national level and provides a framework for future studies of a similar nature to be conducted in an organized manner, and as discussed below, the data ended up being much more diverse than originally perceived by the author.

DISCUSSION

Although the above proclamations may raise more questions than answers, it seems that there is enough substantive direction to suggest that each theme represents a greater construct, and that it represents a vocalized response to overt vulnerability toward this new form of criminality. While the representation of vulnerability may be common to reports of crime in general, identity thieves who exploit victims' information for financial purposes strike into the heart of the primary institution of Western culture: financial stability. Part of this is what makes the crime of identity theft a distinct and unique form of criminality. Identity theft offenses are often masked by digitization, ambiguity, confusion, and losses financially, emotionally, and temporally. Some might be inclined to argue that much of the variation in types of offenses that underlie identity theft may simply be old tricks rewound and tagged with a modern vernacular. Such individuals may also proclaim that these offenses can be adequately explained by existing theories of criminal behavior. However, this may not be the case. It is argued here that the media characterization of identity theft in the U.S. is strongly represented by a reaction to a form of criminality that is different from traditional crimes.

It is true that many forms of identity theft are in fact crimes that have been taking place for hundreds or even thousands of years (i.e., physical impersonation for financial or substantive gain) and some of this behavior can, in part, be explained by leading theories of crime.[9] However, the evolution of the criminogenic structure of modern offending has fostered a new type of offending that has not received much attention from scholars. The social ecology of the Western world has changed considerably in recent years. Many people now rely on digital technology as a way of life and it is clear that much identity theft takes place at some level of digitization (either directly or indirectly). This occurs both directly through personal marketing and commerce and indirectly through financial institutions relying on digital technology to remain competitive, regardless of whether the consumer participates in the digitized economy.

The digital economy in the United States and other countries is unavoidable for consumers. The digitization of society gave birth to digitized crime and has undoubtedly contributed to the explosion of identity theft in recent years. Such offending constitutes a broad form of criminality where terrestrial laws of physics may not apply as they do to conventional crimes. In such cases victim-offender interface may be marginalized and the opportunity to offend is as abundant as the imagination, and the technology, will allow.

Whether media has overplayed (sensationalized) the identity theft problem remains unclear. Rather, it may be that the media underplays the problem. It is simply too early to tell. As noted above, victims' reports suggest that the prevalence of victimization is considerable; however, it can be argued that the data have limited external validity. Yet, all things considered, one could argue that there are more potential victims of identity theft at any given time than for any other form of criminality and that the prevalence of identity theft victimization is profound. This could be due, generally speaking, to an increased ratio of victims to offenders in that a single offender may victimize a large number of individuals. The identities that are sought by identity thieves cannot be protected in the same manner as one protects his or her body or material belongings. This realization may produce an overt sense of susceptibility to victimization which makes identity theft a very unique form of criminal behavior in which we have had little time to understand. Thus, when the news media treat cases with verbal or innate sensationalism (e.g., scorn, shock, marvel over the use of technology in the crime, or an unstoppable problem), it may in fact be due to a lack of understanding (both in the problem itself and how to curtail it) rather than a reflection of the reality of the problem. Perhaps in the future the media response will be different having had the opportunity to digest the dynamics of identity theft. Perhaps this could be done using localized data and corresponding media reports, however, those conducting such research must consider the nature of identity theft and the reality of the criminal justice system. This is not a localized crime for the most part and research should be continued at the broader level and must consider the trans-jurisdictional nature of this type of offending.

Identity theft and related offenses are likely going to be around for some time and will continue to thrive as opportunities are abundant and the potential for sanction is low. This becomes increasingly important as we continue to rely more on technology as a way of life. This new reality has dramatically increased opportunities to offend and arguably lessened the role of capable guardians that might otherwise deter much criminality. Regarding offending, no longer is it necessary to be a good or cunning actor/performer to be a financially successful imposter, nor is it a requirement to be a brave burglar to reap unguarded spoils. Even an unguarded target may succumb to circumstances that increase the odds of detection; from behind a computer screen, the environment is more easily controlled, for example. It is clear that much of identity theft takes place not in the streets, but in cyberspace where the rules of the game are quite different (see Yar, 2006). This evolution in the opportunity structure for offending may have implications for current theories of crime to be extended to account for this new reality.

ENDNOTE

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ENDNOTE

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[1] This research found 33 unique terms used by law enforcement agencies, nationwide, that were used to charge or arrest individuals for acts of identity theft.

[2] Additionally, many victims who do report to law enforcement are often not even given a report number by the police (see Morris et al. 2006).

[3] Newman and McNally (2005) provide one of the only literature reviews over identity theft to date. It truly cannot be reiterated enough how little attention academia has given to identity theft as a macro issue. Further, their work is very comprehensive; funded and developed by a grant from the National Institute of Justice (NIJ). While they clearly note that much of the information that they relied on cannot be considered scholarly, their work still provides great deal of face valid information regarding identity theft.

[4] Interestingly, Newman and McNally note that credit reporting agencies have raised concerns that cases may exist whereupon supposed victims of identity theft may have been forging Identity Theft Affidavits and police records, thereby using identifying information criminally for personal financial gain. However, the authors note that there is no statistical evidence to support this proposition.

[5] The number of articles decreased from 300 to 257 due to multiple articles focusing on the same identity theft offense and due to articles not meeting the third criterion for inclusion (providing three manifest codes). For more information on how the data were managed for this project, please contact the author.

[6] Cronbach's Alpha results were .69, .75, .85, and .64 for the themes media scorn, shock, technological marvel and identity theft as an unstoppable problem, respectively.

[7] The offender sophistication scheme was a qualitative classification scheme developed to reflect the tactical sophistication level of the offender and the extent of his/her victims. Circumstantial identity thieves were considered the least sophisticated as their behavior reflect situational circumstance rather than pre-meditation. General identity theft offenders are not considered very sophisticated, but use simple but effective premeditated tactics. Sophisticated offenders incorporate the use of technology and target large numbers of victims. Highly sophisticated offenders are a small subset of the sophisticated group yet their crimes may be globally represented and have reported criminal financial gains in the millions of dollars annually over extended periods of time. Due to limits on space, more on the development of the sophistication scheme is omitted here. Please contact the author for more information on the development and/or extent of the sophistication scheme.

[8] Special thanks to the anonymous review for his/her comments on the presentation of the data on Table 3. The suggestions were very well received.

[9] The violation of trust is arguably a central theme in identity theft offending, as with many other forms of white-collar criminality. Susan Shapiro's (1980; 1990) ideology on the issue of trust and white-collar offending may apply equality to many forms of identity theft and should be taken into consideration by future researchers of identity theft.