ON NOVEMBER 30, 2021, A MASS SHOOTING WAS CARRIED out by a 15-year-old student at an Oxford, Michigan, high school. Within days, multiple telephone calls and social media postings threatened copycat shootings, prompting a number of regional schools to announce that they would close for a time. The Oxford school shooting is one example from a continual stream of crimes, some serious like the fatal Oxford shooting, some minor involving car stunts and pranks, through which copycat crime captures and retains public attention. But while copycat crime regularly garners media and public attention, the dynamics of this phenomenon are not understood.

In response, this book, Copycat Crime and Copycat Criminals, examines what copycat crime is, what theories are related to it, and what forces drive it. Imbedded in the broader public and academic interest in media and justice, copycat crime sits at the intersection of media and crime. The core of the crime and media connection is reflected in copycat crime. Despite copycat crime being uncommon, the study of the phenomenon reveals the relationship between the varied forms of media and criminality in contemporary society.

While prior popular writings and academic research provide a descriptive history of copycat crimes, and online search engines quickly deliver a rich set of anecdotal examples, neither provide an assessment of where the study of copycat crime currently stands. Despite centuries of public interest and decades of research, copycat crime remains understudied and misperceived. Paradoxically, its significance has been both downplayed in criminology and exaggerated in society. Copycat crime influences crime trends, criminal justice policies, criminal careers, and
public perceptions of criminality. At the same time, these crimes do not appear to significantly raise a society’s crime or violence rates. Copycat crime remains today a phenomenon with high public interest but incomplete understanding.

As social media increasingly dominate contemporary societies, interest in copycat crime has followed, making the 2020s an excellent era in which to study the phenomenon. Three trends deserve our attention. First, the relationship between media consumers and their media has changed from passive to participatory; second, criminogenic media have been suggested as playing a significant role in the launching of a number of juvenile crime careers; and third, copycat crimes appear to be increasing in prevalence.

In addition, physical separation of consumers is no longer a barrier to sharing content, and social media consumers can have multiple pseudonyms while remaining anonymous. The interactive nature of new media further encourages consumers to be participants in creating psychologically engaging, media-generated experiences. In sum, social media afford potential copycat offenders the ability to seek out like-minded crime models, both real-world and fictional, interact with them psychologically and anonymously, and virtually rehearse and plan a copycat crime.

As crimes posted for social media audiences become common, and as media cement their new relationship with their audiences, we have a new opportunity to examine closely and understand copycat crime. Seizing that opportunity, in this book I summarize the history of copycat crime, rigorously define its boundaries, characterize the theories and theoretical concepts applicable to copycat crime, and offer a way forward regarding copycat-crime-related research and public policy. Collectively, the nine chapters of Copycat Crime and Copycat Criminals explore both the allure and the reality of copycat crime.