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# Social Learning Theory And Black Friday

## Legend of Black Friday

Imagine sitting down at the kitchen table surrounded by family and friends while spending the Thanksgiving holiday together. Laughter and stories are echoed through the house while the resonances of football games are playing in the background. Delicious food has filled everyone's bellies and naptime is near. While Thanksgiving is a holiday focused on being thankful and appreciative for the gift of life and family fellowship, the day after Thanksgiving validates to show the opposite effect of what the holiday is truly about. This day is now acknowledged as "Black Friday."

Thanksgiving was recognized as a federal holiday starting in 1870 giving the ability for most companies to follow the direction of the government as a day off work. In 1924 Macy's department store would capitalize on starting a tradition of a parade in New York that would pass in front of the store showing off the holiday seasons must-have items. Since Thanksgiving was on a Thursday, and if employees were lucky enough not to work in retail, employees would use Friday as a day off to have a four-day weekend to get a jump-start on buying holiday presents. Author Jane Thomas from Winthrop University believes the term "Black Friday" to be an urban myth that was developed in 1965 by the Philadelphia Police Department. The Philadelphia Police Department was required to work 12 hours on the Friday after Thanksgiving to deal with the enormous number of shoppers and the exorbitant amount of vehicle traffic. While the exact origin of the term is unclear, Thomas also mentions how the term was co-opted from accounting practices in the 1980s as numerical values in red were considered losses and numerical values in black were designated as profits or gains. (Thomas & Peters, p. 522).

When the Black Friday sale advertisements come out in the Thanksgiving Day newspaper, consumers will scour through the paper to find the biggest discounts on the hottest items of the holiday buying season. Lines out the doors of businesses appear to be miles long and people come prepared to get the lower priced items, even for a two-dollar pillow. The public walks through the department store of their choosing stalking the items the public wants to buy much like a lion stalks its prey, waiting on the time to pounce on the deal. Once the store opens or the product becomes available to the public, consumers become rambunctious and will push and shove so that they get their hands on an item that there are few quantities of on Black Friday. Even though law enforcement can help control most of the chaotic crowds and the public's behaviors, there is always that chance of something going wrong. While Black Friday shopping may seem like a good idea to join the crazy madness to save money, the risk of injuries and death become greater due to the behaviors of others. In order to better understand why people turn to deviant leisure by starting fights and killing others on Black Friday, criminologists must use the social learning theory and social bonding theory to explain why someone would risk going to jail over a simple bargain.

## What Makes A Good Theory

While examining why Black Friday shoppers resort to deviant leisure behavior, two theories will help support this claim. First is the social learning theory and second, being the social bonding

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theory. Understanding what makes a good theory is key in connecting these two together with Black Friday shopping. Crime continues to grow, which causes researchers to develop different criminological theories to better understand criminal behavior. Theories produce hypotheses about the factors that take into consideration legal and criminal justice actions and decisions (Akers & Sellers, p. 13). College students, professionals, theorists, and practitioners all have different views on the meaning and value of what makes a theory “good.”

When theories are created, it does not guarantee that something will happen more as theories are simple generalizations that explain how two different ideologies are related to each other and not just inevitable conclusions. According to Akers and Sellers, theories are about real situations, feelings, experiences and human behavior (Akers & Sellers, p. 1). In reference to Black Friday shopping madness, two criminological theories of social learning theory and social bonding theory generalize the facts that are already known about Black Friday shopping and test against new facts. Using these criminological theories will help give tentative answers to the questions of why Black Friday is becoming a dangerous tradition and what makes shoppers commit such crimes.

In selecting social learning theory and social bonding theory to explain the correlation between leisure defiance and the reasons for injuries and deaths on Black Friday, these two theories will try to answer why social and legal norms are violated by using facts that have been repeatedly confirmed through observation and experiment. According to Akers and Sellers, there are two interrelated parts to this question: “Why are there variations in group rates of crime and deviance, and why are some individuals more likely than others to commit criminal and deviant acts?” (Akers & Sellers, p. 3). The first part focuses on the differences in societal and group patterns, while the second part focuses on individual differences. In order to better understand why the public violates social and legal norms while Black Friday shopping, questions are asked such as why do people flock to the stores for discounted items, why does violence occur, and what makes a person commit a crime for such a small incentive?

## Theory Description

The reasons why Black Friday crimes happen and what propels someone to risk imprisonment over material items such as a sale on a television will become clearer using the social learning theory and social bonding theory. The origin of the social learning theory in the field of criminology refers primarily to the theory of crime and deviance that was developed from Ronald L. Akers, based on the principles of Albert Bandura that “reciprocal interaction between cognitive, behavioral and environmental determinants” (Akers and Sellers, p.85). Akers developed his theory after working with Robert L. Burgess and reformulating Edwin H. Sutherland's differential association theory of crime. “The social learning theory is one of the most frequently tested and endorsed theories of crime and delinquency among academic criminologists” (Akers & Sellers, p.85).

Akers' social learning theory has been applied to a lot of different types of deviant and criminal behavior that correlates with the mechanism of rewards and punishments. “Social learning theory retains a strong element of the symbolic interactionism found in the concepts of differential association and definitions from Sutherland's theory” (Akers & Sellers, p. 89). Akers has focused on the four areas such as differential association, differential reinforcement, imitation, and definitions when discussing the social learning theory of criminal behaviors.

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The major control theorist, Travis Hirschi, developed the social bonding theory in the field of criminology in 1969 with the collaboration of Criminologist Gottfredson and published in *Causes of Delinquency* (Akers & Sellers, p. 128). The social bonding theory originated after taking into consideration all types of criminal and deviant behavior. Hirschi took all the previous control theories and put together his thoughts on delinquent behavior. Hirschi stands out from all the other control theorists because he used different testing methods to back up his social bonding theory. While most theorists want to find out why crimes are committed, Hirschi wants the answers to why society isn't committing crimes.

The main thesis of the social bonding theory proves that when the bond between an individual to society is no longer strong that delinquent behavior occurs (Özbay & Özcan, p. 134). Attachment, commitment, beliefs, and involvement are all elements that make up a bond and determine how an individual's behaviors will turn out. When an individual's bond with society is strong, then the better chance the individual will abide by societal norms and not break the laws. If an individual has a weak bond with society, then that individual is more than likely to break the law because conforming to what society wants will only increase the chances of criminal behavior to occur.

## Theory Assumption

The social learning theory is a broader theory that includes the differential association theory processes. In criminal behavior, there are mechanisms of learning, which means that people pick up in different ways on how to do certain things. A child inherently does not have primal knowledge that stealing is unacceptable but is taught the wrongs and rights based on their upbringing. Whereas if the child witnesses the deviant behavior of their parents stealing, then this becomes a learned and acceptable behavior. Burgess and Akers identified the learning mechanisms to include, "differential reinforcement, whereby "operant" behavior (the voluntary actions of the individual) is contained or shaped by rewards and punishments" (Akers & Sellers, p. 88). Like the child mentioned before, the child steals from the store and is then rewarded by keeping the item that was stolen. The child is going to continue stealing from the store due to the enjoyment of being able to keep what they take. Burgess and Akers also identified and used other mechanisms that include, classical conditioning, discriminative and internal stimuli, and schedules of reinforcement, along with other principles of behavior modification (Akers & Sellers, p. 88). Like the child mentioned before, the child steals from the store and is then rewarded by keeping the item that was stolen. The child is going to continue stealing from the store due to the enjoyment of being able to keep what they take. Some other mechanisms used include classical conditioning, discriminative and internal stimuli, and schedules of reinforcement, along with other principles of behavior modification (Akers & Sellers, p. 88).

Classical conditioning is when there is an involuntary response to something by using a certain behavior. Classic conditioning is best described in the example of the Noble Peace prizewinner Ivan Pavlov and his dogs. Discriminative stimuli include factors from the environment and internal motivations of a person that makes them react with certain cues or signals for behaviors. Reinforcement, whether the choice is negative or positive, is scheduled to reflect the ratio and rate in which rewards or punishments are given after behavior reaction.

"The basic assumption in social learning theory is that the same learning process in a context of social structure, interaction, and situation, produces both conforming and deviant behavior

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(Akers & Sellers, p. 89).” The social learning theory states that the probability of an individual committing a crime or following society’s laws is going to be based on the individual’s learning history. If an individual’s social structure includes those who break the law, then that individual is going to learn the same behaviors. If breaking the law becomes a learned behavior, it will be hard for that individual to have a good bond with society.

The social bonding theory was developed by Hirschi to understand social conformity and to study why people choose not to conform. If one’s direction is heavily influenced by committing crimes, then that individual will conform to committing a crime because their bond with society is weak and going against society’s norms on purpose. If an individual has learned what society’s norms and laws are, then that individual will more than likely have a strong bond with society, therefore, being an abiding citizen and conforming to what is right.

Hirschi proposed that there are four elements to the social bonding theory: attachment, commitment, involvement, and beliefs (Sims, p. 102). Attachment is the kind of bond that an individual has with society. If an individual has a strong and stable attachment to others within the society, then that individual is less likely to violate society’s norms. If a weak attachment is present, then an individual will deviate from society’s norms by engaging in criminal behaviors. Commitment is when an individual has invested time into something. If an abiding citizen of society is committed to conforming to society’s norms, the less likely that citizen is going to lose what goals have been completed because of the amount of commitment fulfilled. When an individual is involved in productive things such as employment, education, or raising a family, there is less time and opportunity to engage in deviant activities. Beliefs play a factor in an individual’s conformity to society based on if the norms the individual believes in are similar to society’s norms.

## **Crime or Deviant Behavior Application**

After getting a better understanding of the social learning theory and social bonding theory, both theories will be used to explain why someone would risk going to jail over a simple bargain on Black Friday. The chaotic scenes of people being pushed, shoved, and trampled to the ground have become newsworthy headlines addressing Black Friday sales. According to <http://blackfridaydeathcount.com/>, there have been twelve deaths and one hundred and seventeen injuries reported since 2006 due to Black Friday madness. Although these numbers don’t seem high, Black Friday sales continue to start earlier each year by starting the evening of Thanksgiving. While retailers have opened earlier times for shoppers to start, this only allows for more crime and deviant behavior to occur.

The social learning theory is based on the idea that the voluntary actions of an individual’s behaviors are shaped by rewards and punishments that one may receive. When it comes to Black Friday shopping, shoppers’ deviate from their social norms in order to get that two-dollar pillow. Shoppers are going to have to act fast and in this process, become caught up in the moment and disassociate from what is acceptable. Shoppers will resort to any means necessary to obtain the item desired. While there may be only twenty pillows in the bargain bin, there may be forty customers ready to buy such an amazing deal. Customers will do whatever it takes to get that pillow because they want to be the first to grab the deal. Customers view Black Friday shopping as a way to increase their buying potential by saving the most money on these items. This propels customers to risk imprisonment by competing with other customers to save

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more money. The social learning theory describes that Black Friday shoppers conform to what the other shoppers are doing and will quickly catch on to others' behaviors whether good or bad.

The social structure, interaction, and situation effects how an individual is going to respond to Black Friday shopping. In the scenario of a Black Friday event, shoppers are lined up behind closed doors of retailers until it is time to shop until you drop. The social structure at a busy store is going to be hard to assess as not only will there be a lot of chaos going on with the products coming off the shelves, but shoppers will be yelling and shuffling to get to that item. If a shopper gets the item off the shelf, that shopper is going to be happy and will move on. If the shopper doesn't get to the item in time, that shopper is more than likely to start a fight with another shopper so that they can obtain the item. When the individual starts to throw punches and tries to take the item from another customer, the social learning theory best describes this situation as "criminal behavior that is learned in a process of symbolic interaction with others (Akers & Sellers, p. 87)."

Black Friday is known for getting the best deals on items, so customers want to obtain such deals even if it means there is no urgent need for the item by the customer. Customers have also observed criminal behavior on Black Friday from news reports and in-person experiences, which can become a learned behavior. If one customer starts to grab an item early before it is time to do so, plenty of other customers will follow suit behind because it is a competition to grab the item. While that customer took the move to grab the item early, it causes other customers to become agitated and anxious to grab the same item. This then leads to customers becoming aggressive by pushing others that can lead to injury or death. Once one shopper starts to become aggressive and hostile, customers around that same person become socially inclined to learn that by becoming aggressive and hostile there is a better chance at getting the item. The reward at the end of Black Friday shopping consists of a discounted item.

The social bonding theory can explain how attachment, commitment, involvement, and beliefs play a factor in the dangerous outcomes of shopping. If a shopper has a strong bond with society, then the chances of that shopper following the store's rules regarding Black Friday are good. When a shopper doesn't have a strong bond with society, the shopper is going to commit such acts as pulling a gun or using physical force. Those who go to Black Friday sales and cause harm to others are displaying a poor bond with society and little attachment for what deviant behaviors they have caused. Guns are shot and punches are punched all because one shopper has different beliefs than the rest of the shoppers. While it may be a right to wear a gun for protection, society believes that shooting a gun into a group of shoppers because of a bargain doesn't follow under the norms of society. Those who simply have a negative bond with society are not going to care if they get incarcerated over a two-dollar pillow.

## **Policy Solutions**

To help cut down on Black Friday crimes and deviant behaviors, it is important to look at possible policy solutions based on the social learning theory and social bond theory. While customers are the ones creating issues such as starting fights, workers may also benefit from policy changes. Prior to Black Friday, store personnel should have increased education and training to address merchandise location, coupon procedures, and safety tips when dealing with huge crowds of people (Simpson, Taylor, O'Rourke, & Shaw, p. 3). When workers are aware of

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what to expect on days like Black Friday, the workers can better assess situations where fights break out or guns are present. While it may be rare for a gun to go off in a store, it is better for the workers to be fully educated on what to do if they suspect a shopper acting suspicious and may have a gun on them. Law enforcement can provide training to workers on how to deescalate certain situations with customers. Not only will the additional training make the workers feel more confident in working the shift, but the skills and knowledge will help the event run smoothly. Workers that are educated may be able to stop a violent situation from happening, which can help lower the deviant behavior that occurs.

Another policy solution to Black Friday madness is by increasing law enforcement present at the stores. Law enforcement may be present in small quantities due to the busy start of the holiday season, but by increasing the number of officers present could play a huge role in how certain individuals behave. The presence of law enforcement would make the majority of the public conform and following the laws by being civil. The less law enforcement that is present, the better the chances of someone starting a fight or shooting a gun. The social bonding theory would support this policy solution as long as law enforcement has a good bond with society. If a particular department has a bad reputation or poor bond with the community, then the chances of the public acknowledging and abiding the officers will be low.

A third policy solution to help build the social bond between society and law enforcement is to use all resources possible on Black Friday. While law enforcement officers are already short staffed and overworked during the holidays, using other departments such as the Emergency Management Agency (EMA) could help offer more support and crowd control. While EMA officers are volunteers, local law enforcement officers rely on EMA workers to back them up when needed. EMA officers can not only help with crowd control of the busy shoppers, but can assist in emergencies, vehicle security, directed patrols, and traffic support. EMA officers would be utilized the whole day, but mostly during the busiest starting times for stores to open for the sales. EMA officers can take turns at various locations that draw in the most people.

The last policy solution to cut down on crime during Black Friday shopping that law enforcement officers can conform to is developing a strong system of communication with all participating stores. It is imperative that the stores and law enforcement are on the same page when it comes to how everything will run. Conducting a meeting with law enforcement and store managers to come up with a plan can help get better control of the madness that is about to endure. Store managers can even create teams so that employees know whom to report to in case of an emergency and law enforcement know whom to contact in case of any concerns that may arise.

## **Ending Black Friday Chaos**

The social learning theory and social bonding theory help to better understand why people turn to deviant leisure by starting fights and killing others on Black Friday and taking the risk of going to jail over a cheaper item. The social learning theory proves that the public is interested in getting an item for a cheaper price, so the reward of pushing others and becoming violent for that item is worth it. When certain individuals start to act out on Black Friday by name-calling, throwing punches, and aggressively walking in busy crowds, other individuals start to socially conform and react by demonstrating the same types of behaviors. When the crowds are already hard to control, having angry customers can put the situation at risk for serious injuries and

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possibly even death. The social bonding theory proves that when an individual has a weak bond with society, that individual is already at a greater risk of not following society's norms. When the individual doesn't have that bond to conform to society, that individual will end up breaking the law because they don't want to follow the norms that society believes in. Even if the sale is just for a two-dollar pillow, those who have weak bonds and are not socially connected are going to commit crimes such as pulling guns on others and throwing punches. Law enforcement can use the policy solutions to assist the Black Friday chaos and make it a better running system each year.

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