

The Influence of Media on the Psychology of Crime and Aggression

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Abstract: *This paper is highly relevant because the relationship between media exposure and the psychology of crime and aggression has been a very vital focal area for both psychological and criminological research. The study explores the desensitization hypothesis, which is put forth as a notion that repeated exposure to violent content diminishes emotional sensitivity towards real - world aggression and therefore can normalize or glamorize criminal behaviour. The paper continues into the role of media in cognitive distortion, towards fostering aggressive tendencies, and also triggers imitation through the social learning theory. Attention is then paid to the psychological mechanisms involved, including how the display of violent role models and the propensity for repeated exposure to aggressive content influences aggression cognition and behavior among adolescents. The studies also review more general social implications of the media's influence on attitudes toward law enforcement, criminal justice, and society's attitudes toward violence. The paper integrates modern studies with theoretical frameworks, thus giving a view of what may be the causal link between media consumption and aggression or criminality on the one hand and its moderators: individual personality, environmental conditions, and socio - economic ones on the other. In this respect, this paper is an attempt toward that direction by presenting a refined understanding of the role played by the media within the psychology of crime and aggression and providing policy recommendations for regulating media as well as informing public awareness of how media could be prevented from contributing to negative outcomes.*

Keywords: Media influence, Crime psychology, Aggression, Desensitization, Social learning theory, Cognitive distortions, Violent content, Adolescents, Criminal behaviour

1. Introduction

This is one of the most visible trends in media consumption over the last few decades. When it became something that is part and parcel of everyday life, media consumption had skyrocketed. Today, it is the internet, social media, as well as streaming services, all shoving at us a variety of content ranging from crime to violence at a rate we could have never had imagined just a few decades ago. Current studies show that an average person spends a considerable amount of their daily life observing media in one form or another, whether it is television, movies, video games, or online content. The immense exposure has sparked a great deal of concern among psychologists, sociologists, and criminologists over the possible effects of media exposure on human behaviour, particularly crime and aggression. Media, particularly violent media, are believed by many to play a critical role in either influencing behaviour or shaping society's views of aggression and crime. For instance, violent video games expose the players to thoughts and aggressive behaviour in most instances, especially among children and adolescents.¹ Understanding the relationship between media, crime, and aggression is important because it raises very strong issues in society. Media not only reflects the behaviour of society but also serves as a tool for regulating the attitude, belief, and action of persons. Most notably, violent media content may make viewers accept aggression, dulled to real - life

violence, and even imitate crime. It further distorts perceptions of crime, creating an illusion that violence is more prevalent than it actually is.² It accompanies fear, anxiety and support for punitive criminal justice policies. In addition, the influence of media on the most vulnerable populations, such as children and predisposed ones to behavioural problem necessitates the need for even more research to regulate the media.³ This study researches critically how different media types inform psychology about crime and aggression. Using both theoretical frameworks and empirical studies, this paper tried to find answers regarding mechanisms through which media affects individuals' thoughts and behaviours toward crime and violence.

2. Research Questions

The following are the key questions that frame this research to guide the research:

- 1) How does repeated exposure to violent media content influence the aggression and criminal behaviour of the individual?
- 2) What psychological mechanisms explain the

² Gerbner, G., Gross, L., Morgan, M., & Signorielli, N. (1986). "Living with television: The dynamics of the cultivation process." In *Perspectives on media effects* (pp.17 - 40). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

³ Strasburger, V. C., Wilson, B. J., & Jordan, A. B. (2013). *Children, adolescents, and the media*. Sage Publications

¹ Anderson, C. A., & Bushman, B. J. (2002). "The effects of media violence on society." *Science*, 295 (5564), 2377 - 2379

association between media exposure and aggression?

- 3) Does one type of demographic group - again, more vulnerable to the negative impact of violent media - get affected by said influences?
- 4) Identify the potential interactions between environmental and individual factors in terms of mitigating the effects of media on aggression.

This study seeks to provide the most comprehensive view of how the media influences crime and violence and gives an insight into possible solutions that could diminish such effects.

3. Overview of Media and its Forms

Media, in its most general sense, refers to forms and methods of conveying information, entertainment, and communication to a wider group. It includes those more traditional forms like television and films but also recent forms of digital media in video games and social networking. Each form of media conveys its information in quite specific ways to audiences in reference to crimes and aggression. Television and film have been at the top of the list of entertainment and information sources for many years. Finally, there are scripted and unscripted depictions of crime involving violence, which often tend to be dramatized to appeal to the target audience. Video games, however, are an interactive medium where individuals consume violence but take an active part in violent scenarios as well. These video games require active participation in aggressive behaviour, like first - person shooter games, that have thus caused anxiety among people about the increasing aggressiveness of players.⁴ Social media perhaps is the most vibrant and ubiquitous form of media in the present era through which information on crime and violence can easily be multiplied and propagated. Platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube allow immediate dissemination of crime news, sensational contents, and even sometimes livestreaming violent scenes, thus providing unfiltered windows to the realities of living aggression.⁵ Over the past few years it was observed that the volumes of violent content were growing on all the above - mentioned media platforms. For example, violence in movies has been presented more double than it is since the 1950s, where modern contemporary movies often do more graphic forms of violence.⁶ In a similar sense, violent video games have become common, especially among the youth. Indeed, a report showed that 85% of all video games available for purchase in the US between 2005 and 2015 had some level of violent content, with most of them being directed at adolescents.⁷ On social media,

sensationalized crime stories and viral acts of violence further perpetuate that culture of fear mixed with total fascination with criminal behaviour. Algorithms functioning in such realms have a tendency to tend towards those pieces of content that elicited strong emotional responses; this maximises exposure to the infamous crime - related content.⁸ No discussion of the media influence on norms and value formation can be considered complete without recognizing the role such media plays in socialising people. Media are great agents of socialisation by taking up roles of influencing how people perceive their reality, including crimes and violence. For instance, cultivation theory assumes exposure to vast levels of violent media causes a "mean world syndrome" wherein the viewer believes that the world is more dangerous than it actually is because perception has been obscured by disproportionately large media concentrations of crime and violence.⁶ In media presentation, representation of crime usual tends to stereotype crimes either racial or gendered and portray criminals and victims - a bias which is carried forward to more social inequalities. But the repeated exposure of violent pictures to the people makes it ordinary and not something very unique, and it deprives a person of his emotional response to actual violence, in addition to creating a culture where aggression becomes a norm. Media, on the one hand may reflect the aspects of the given society, but then again, media can be employed to reshape social values in the climate where violent behaviour continues to be portrayed as glamorous and heroic and justified.⁹

4. Psychological Theories on Media Influence

Desensitization theory

Desensitization Theory: it is suggested that the rampant exposure of violence diminishes an individual's emotional reaction to life violence. This is because the brain becomes accustomed to violent stimuli and cannot respond any longer with distress or empathy towards aggressive acts. The more people are usually exposed to violent media, then the more desensitized they become of other people's pains and sufferings due to diminished arousal and reduced moral judgment on violence.¹⁰ The impact is very profound, especially on the normalization of violence. Studies are indicating reduced physiological response to violence from repeated exposure to violent video games, movies, or television shows, such as decreasing heart rate and skin conductance when witnessing violent acts.¹¹ This dampened affective sensitivity may lead to higher tolerance of violence and a greater likelihood to Favor violent methods for

⁴ Ferguson, C. J. (2007). "The good, the bad, and the ugly: A meta - analytic review of positive and negative effects of violent video games." *Psychiatric Quarterly*, 78 (4), 309 - 316.

⁵ Oksanen, A., & Hawdon, J. (2017). *Violent crime on social media: Predictors and strategies for intervention*. Palgrave Macmillan.

⁶ Bushman, B. J., & Anderson, C. A. (2001). "Media violence and the American public: Scientific facts versus media misinformation." *American Psychologist*, 56 (6 - 7), 477 - 489.

⁷ Smith, S. L., & Boyson, A. R. (2002). "Violence in television programming overall: University of California, Santa Barbara study." *National Television Violence Study*, Vol.3, Sage Publications.

⁸ Tufekci, Z. (2018). *Twitter and tear gas: The power and fragility of networked protest*. Yale University Press

⁹ Carnagey, N. L., & Anderson, C. A. (2005). "The effects of reward and punishment in violent video games on aggressive affect, cognition, and behaviour." *Psychological Science*, 16 (11), 882 - 889.

¹⁰ Carnagey, N. L., Anderson, C. A., & Bushman, B. J. (2007). "The effect of video game violence on physiological desensitization to real - life violence." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 43 (3), 489 - 496.

¹¹ Funk, J. B., Baldacci, H. B., Pasold, T., & Baumgardner, J. (2004). "Violence exposure in real - life, video games, television, movies, and the internet: Is there desensitization?" *Journal of Adolescence*, 27 (1), 23 - 39.

resolving conflicts. For example, children who watched violent cartoons had been found to be more aggressive in school contexts as compared to those who experienced greater extents of violence.

Social Learning Theory

The general explanation of SLT by Albert Bandura is that individuals learn behaviours, either directly or indirectly, by imitating or modelling behaviour when they view a character—that can be a real - life character or fictional—who is rewarded for performing such an action. This theory is crucial in the study of media influence because it describes how viewers, especially children, model and imitate their violent activities viewed in the media. According to SLT, people are likely to use aggression more frequently if they have role models who are expressed as powerful, successful or heroic.¹² Video game, television and movie characters characteristically display aggression that is rewarded or glorified, so one can get the idea that violence pays or is acceptable for achieving something. For example, it is documented that children who watch violent superhero movies will become habitual offenders of aggressive acts owing to their admiration for the characters.⁵ Another classic case is the infamous "copycat" behaviour witnessed in one of the most documented mass shootings after the Columbine High School mass slaughter of 1999, where attackers of subsequent mass shootings have been reported to have drawn inspiration from media reportage and details of Columbine massacre.¹³

Cognitive Behavioural Theory

Cognitive Behavioural Theory (CBT) contends that media can stimulate cognitive distortions - misleading or exaggerated thoughts - that influence the beliefs of individuals regarding violence, crime, and their potential implications. The same is increasingly more likely whenever one internalizes violent depictions as non - existent or overestimated as realistic, inevitable, and/or with slight implications as chances to occur. Such beliefs make aggression appear as an acceptable response to a conflict, crime as less dangerous than it actually is, and so on.¹⁴ The extent of media consumption, especially violent consumption, contributes to how an individual perceives the implications of criminal conduct. In most contents, aggression is rewarded or unpenalized. This leads to distorted perceptions that affect real - world understanding about the working of justice systems. For example, in most crime dramas, it is often portrayed that law enforcement officers solve cases involving excessive force and little legal or moral consequences. Such depictions may induce exaggerated assumptions of the effectiveness of violence and undervalued estimations of legal consequences in relation to

criminal activity.¹⁵ Cognitive distortions that may be induced by media may lead to a distorted view of life wherein violence is considered even more tolerable or potent than it actually is.

5. Impact of Media on Aggression and Crime

The immediate after effects of exposure to violent media occur in the increased aggressive thoughts, feelings, and behaviour. If children and teenagers watch violent television programs, movies, or video games, they usually react aggressively to them a little while after watching. It is quite normal for short - term effects to be related to media activation of aggressive thoughts and feelings they reflect. Research finds that minimal exposure to violent media will increase aggressive behaviours, including irritation, physical aggression, or hostile attributions toward others. In contrast, long - term effects are quite insidious in character because repeated exposure to violent content can actually reinforce aggressive thought patterns and normalize violence as an acceptable response to conflict. It leads to a higher likelihood of actual - life violence not only in personal life but also in more general communal life. Young minds are relatively more prone to such long - term effects as their cognitive and emotional development stages are in the developmental stage. Continuous exposure to media violence often shapes their beliefs, therefore having a greater chance that their aggression gets manifested at later stages of life or that they support such violence.

Teenagers are the most vulnerable group to be affected by the influence of violent media. The period of adolescence is burdened with extensive emotional, social, and intellectual developments, making the teenagers prone to external influences, including media. Media often act as a reference source for behavioural standards, and in the presence of glorification of violence, youngsters are more likely to emulate the situations in real life.¹⁶ This is particularly scary for some sections, such as traumatized children or behaviourally challenged. Such populations are more liable to internalize the aggressive performances witnessed in the media, as they may not have the opportunity to fully develop social or emotive coping mechanisms that will allow them to differentiate between fictions and appropriate realities.¹⁷

Direct causal link between media consumption and criminal behaviour does not exist. Media consumption has, however, been shown to have a possible correlation with increased aggressive or criminal tendencies. The mechanism is often indirect. Violent media desensitizes people to the consequences of aggression and makes criminal behaviour

¹² Bandura, A. (1977). "Social learning theory." *Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.*

¹³ Lankford, A. (2016). "Fame - seeking rampage shooters: Initial findings and empirical predictions." *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 27*, 122 - 129.

¹⁴ Wilson, B. J. (2008). "Media and children's aggression, fear, and altruism." *The Future of Children, 18* (1), 87 - 118.

¹⁵ Greitemeyer, T., & Mügge, D. O. (2014). "Video games do affect social outcomes: A meta - analytic review of the effects of violent and prosocial video game play." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 40* (5), 578 - 589.

¹⁶ Krahé, B., & Möller, I. (2010). "Longitudinal effects of media violence on aggression and empathy among German adolescents." *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 31* (5), 401 - 409.

¹⁷ Gentile, D. A., & Bushman, B. J. (2012). "Reassessing media violence effects using a risk and resilience approach to understanding aggression." *Psychology of Popular Media Culture, 1* (3), 138 - 151.

seem more permissible.¹⁸ Exposure to violent media contents can also lower inhibitions, making them more open to criminal activities - in combination with other risk factors, such as weak moral guidance or inadequate supervision. Furthermore, studies indicate that heavy consumers of violent media may ultimately believe violence is a solution to all problems. For example, a violent video game or a crime drama series watched by young adults can perhaps lend them more toward committing criminal activities manifesting the behaviours that they have learned from these sources. This happens especially when criminal behaviour goes unpunished; therefore, there is distortion in the level of risk concerning criminal actions.

The most widely reported of these is likely to be desensitizing effects from exposure to violent media. Indeed, repeated exposure to images and scenes of violence does seem to depress individuals' emotional reactions to real violence, including fear, shock, or empathy. Desensitization along these lines may also be reflected in reduced physiological responses to violence - in particular lowered heart rates and skin conductance responses - when describing or witnessing violent acts. People may become more tolerant of violence, either as witnesses or offenders, since they no longer view it as sinful or emotionally distressing.

Besides emotionally, desensitization to violence affects even the level of moral reasoning and empathy. With such frequent exposure to media that promotes violent behaviour, aggression is slowly being rationalized as acceptable under specific circumstances. This would bring a gradual change in the kind of ethics their minds develop; it is especially dangerous when applied to the minds of young viewers still trying to define their way of ethics. According to research, an individual with high exposure to such violent media would be least likely to have empathy with victims of violence and thus add more fuel to aggressive thought patterns.

6. The Broader Social and Legal Implications

Public Perception of Law Enforcement and the Criminal Justice System

Media presentation of law enforcement can affect directly the public's perception of trust within the criminal justice system; local news sources and entertainment presentations often highlight police officers and legal processes in highly skewed forms. For example, the violence between police and suspects that seems to dominate such media coverage makes the public assume that the law enforcement is getting too aggressive or just does not do a good enough job of doing their duty on crime.¹⁹ This often results in mistrust or, on the other hand, over-reverence for law enforcement as portrayed in popular "cop shows" such as *Law & Order* or

¹⁸ Ferguson, C. J. (2011). "Video games and youth violence: A prospective analysis in adolescents." *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 40 (4), 377 - 391.

¹⁹ Dowler, K. (2003). "Media consumption and public attitudes toward crime and justice: The relationship between fear of crime, punitive attitudes, and perceived police effectiveness." *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*, 10 (2), 109 - 126.

Cops, which presents idealized policing tactics and understates ethical concerns.²⁰ Furthermore, studies have shown that high usage of the media is positively related to harsh and exclusionary crime control policies - that is, greater sentences, more aggressive policing, and increased use of the military in policing. This "mean world syndrome," a term coined by George Gerbner, is brought about by prolonged exposure to high levels of criminal content in media, which leads those exposed to believe that the world is more dangerous than it really is and subsequently stimulates a demand for more vigorous measures to control crime.²¹

Media - Driven Moral Panics and Public Policy

Moral panics, much of whose impetus are provided by the media, end up in public policy measures often very scattershot and ad-hoc reactions. Moral panics arise when the media exploits fears about specific crimes or about specific issues facing society, although the fears entertained are grossly exaggerated in comparison to the real threats. Perhaps the most egregious is the "War on Drugs," traceable to stratospheric media attention in the 1980s and 1990s on drug-related violence. That created a frenzy of policy, starting with draconian measures such as mandatory minimum sentencing laws - that were passed so as to hurt minority communities and exacerbate the crisis of overincarceration in the United States.²² Similarly, media-driven fear over youth violence, especially after school shootings, has led to enhanced school security and zero-tolerance policies. Albeit the goals of such policies have been aimed at preventing violence in schools, they have often criminalized minor infractions in schools and relegated disproportional number students of colour to the prison pipeline. Moral panics can sometimes influence judicial judgments. Reporting on kidnapped children sexually assaulted in the late 1980s and early 1990, made jurisdictions create a sex offender registry and "three-strikes" laws. Despite these policies have been enacted based upon the grounds of public safety, they have been condemned based on the long-term social and legal implications, especially concerning mass incarceration and recidivism.

7. Ethical Issue in Regulating Media Content

The ethical argument regarding regulation in terms of content is not very simple either because it aims to balance free speech, this time through the exercise of freedom in the press, and the indirect harm perpetrated by violent or sensational contents. At the same time, media houses have often resorted to appealing to the protection accorded to them under freedom of the press law as well as the rights of freedom of speech; thus, the regulation of content by the government is also controversial. However, the appetite of

²⁰ Doyle, A. (2006). "How not to think about crime in the media." *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 48 (6), 867 - 885.

²¹ Gerbner, G., Gross, L., Morgan, M., & Signorielli, N. (1986). "Living with television: The dynamics of the cultivation process." In Bryant, J., & Zillmann, D. (Eds.), *Perspectives on Media Effects*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

²² Reinerman, C., & Levine, H. G. (1997). *Crack in America: Demon Drugs and Social Justice*. University of California Press.

violent media on matters of aggression and crime raises questions on ethical responsibilities of media producers to reduce the production of harmful contents. Examples abound in countries such as the United Kingdom that have developed regulatory bodies called Ofcom to oversee the kind of broadcast content aired so as not to offend certain ethical standards regarding violence, profanity, or even hate speech.²³ In this regard, the U. S. The FCC regulates broadcast content to the level of laws surrounding indecency and obscenity. However, with streaming sites or online media, the landscape is becoming much more difficult, as these platforms often fall outside the scope of what traditional broadcasting regulation can cover. One area of ethical concern is content regulation for children and adolescents who are likely to be particularly affected by the media in question. Rating systems by the MPAA on film or ESRB on video games offer some measure of guidance to parents but fail to prevent children from accessing inappropriate content, especially in the digital age.

Role of media literacy and public awareness in mitigating adverse effects

Of course, one of the most effective ways to reduce the adverse effects of media is through education with media literacy. It makes it possible for people to scrutinize the content of the media critically, comprehend the messages, and realize the kind of impact that has on thoughts and behaviours. With this development in critical thinking, it can be demonstrated that media literacy programs educate those individuals, especially the younger audiences, to know the difference between reality and media portrayal, thus reducing the chance of their internalizing or imitating violent behaviours.²⁴ Such studies have demonstrated that media literacy programs lower violence impacts of negative media. For example, the emulation of violent actions among children has decreased because of the intervention by media literacy through television and video games¹⁰. Also, it will help the public to request accountability from the media on un - ethical portrayals of violence or criminal activity through heightened advocacy of responsible media use. Public awareness campaigns, like the ones that promote responsible media consumption and encourage parental supervision, can also reduce adverse effects of media on aggression and crime. For example, American Academy of Paediatrics (AAP) has issued guidelines asking parents to monitor how much time their children have been spending in front of a screen and how much violent media they might be exposed to during that time, thus acknowledging adverse effects of such content on young minds.²⁵

8. Suggestions

Governments and regulatory bodies must put in place clear and enforceable guidelines about graphic violence material,

²³ Dixon, T. L., & Linz, D. (2000). "Overrepresentation and underrepresentation of African Americans and Latinos as lawbreakers on television news. " *Journal of Communication*, 50 (2), 131 - 154.

²⁴ Potter, W. J. (2004). "Theory of media literacy: A cognitive approach. " *Sage Publications*.

²⁵ American Academy of Pediatrics. (2016). "Media and Young Minds. " Available at: <https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/138/5/e20162591>

especially towards media that find themselves in vulnerable consumer groups - children and adolescents. Some of the possible areas for policy suggestions include more stringent rating systems pegged on age and reprimand for failure to abide by their said rating bodies in terms of their production and distribution.

Education in media literacy should become a part of general education curricula in schools. It will help them learn how to critically analyse media messages and differentiate between reality and entertainment, thus reducing the probability of imitating aggressive behaviour and counteracting the effects of violent media desensitization.

Parents should be inspired to use parental control tools and monitor the types of media content their children are exposed to. For example, educational campaigns might drive the ideas of reducing screen time, choosing the right types of content, or initiating conversations with the children about possible effects of violent media.

Encouragement of the policies on media houses that decrease the glorification of entertainment violence should be another approach. Industry leaders can offer best practices for responsible crime and aggression in entertainment as well as ensure that any act of violence has its consequences attached to it.

The policymakers should find cooperation with mental health professionals and experts from the media enterprises to be aware of the psychological influences of violent content in the media and make policies that are well informed. This interaction might facilitate regulations to balance the freedom of speech with safety for the public and present content that will reduce the dangers without constituting too much censorship of creativity.

The Government and NGOs can also do public awareness campaigns to promote critical media consumption. Such initiatives may enlighten the common man regarding the dangers of over - exposure to violent content and invoke responsible viewership habits among the people, enabling a more informed choice among the audiences.

9. Conclusion

The relationship between the media, crime and aggression is highly complex because evidences from studies reveal apparent connections between violent exposures to the media and increased aggression, especially by young people and other vulnerable subjects. Psychological theories of desensitization, social learning, and cognitive theory also are relevant in discovering ways and means in which the media influence aggressive behaviour, shaping consciousness on violence and crime. Media portraits of police and crime dramatically affect public attitudes and policy sometimes to the point of moral panics and reactionary legal measures. It will also eventually reduce some of the above - mentioned ill effects through media literacy and ethical regulation of the content, but this kind of ceaseless change in digital media raises difficulties in the regulation of violent content. Parents, educators, and policymakers must have a role in making sure that young people have the tools to critically

engage with media content. Thus, long - term changes because of the emergence of new media such as virtual reality and interactive platforms about aggression and criminal behaviour need further research. Cross- cultural studies can also be helpful in establishing whether media influence diverse populations differently and to what extent socio - cultural factors intensify the effects of the media about crime and aggression.

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