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A Theoretical Framework for the Detrimental Effects of Media Violence Exposure on Young People

Maria Diana PIELE [1]

[1] Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, University of Bucharest, Romania; https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5562-8370; dianamariapiele@gmail.com

Abstract: *Multiple forms of violence have emerged in the media over recent decades, and their impact on the public has been the focus of extensive global research. This research often links media violence to an increase in aggression, particularly among young people and children. The purpose of this paper is to present a theoretical framework and highlight significant conclusions regarding the effects of media violence through various forms of content, including television (cartoons, horror movies, news), video games, music lyrics, and social media platforms. It explores how the public can be affected by less friendly, even violent content and what disadvantages arise, offering some suggestions in this regard. Studies have demonstrated that media violence can shape children's behaviors, emotions, and perceptions of the world, often in troubling ways. Some concerning outcomes associated with exposure to violent content include increased aggression, desensitization to violence, distorted worldviews, health problems, and addictions. Not only the effects at the level of behavior were taken into consideration, but also the role of parental involvement. The study contributes to a better understanding of the nature of the media phenomenon and the impact of its content. Other implications were discussed.*

Keywords: *media violence; young people; violence exposure; behavior impact.*

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Introduction

In today's media-driven society, where access to violent media content is more widespread than ever, it is essential to understand the effects of such material on children. Some experts interpret media violence as a public health problem (David-Ferdon & Hertz, 2007), and the normalization of risky behavior can impair judgment and encourage children to make decisions for which they are not emotionally or cognitively prepared. This paper will explore how violent media content influences children's behavior while highlighting the need for parental involvement and media literacy. It is an analysis of research papers, drawing on existing literature on the topic rather than primary data, to provide insights into the implications and potential consequences of violent media exposure on young minds. It brings significant novelty to the field of multidimensional education by exploring the topic on media violence and its impact on children through an integrative approach. While existing research has primarily focused on direct correlations between violent media and behavioral outcomes, this work expands the scope by addressing the issue from a multidimensional educational perspective that encompasses various aspects of development. By integrating findings from psychology, health, media studies, and educational frameworks, the article provides a broader understanding of how violent media content interacts with multiple facets of a child's developmental process, offering a more comprehensive view for media literacy and child development education.

Media violence exposure

While many platforms and media sources provide entertainment and education, they also often depict violent content, which can significantly impact children. Because of their impressionable minds, children may struggle to differentiate between fiction and real-life behavior. As a result, they may start to normalize aggressive actions, believing that violence is an acceptable response to frustration or conflict. Additionally, since many teenagers enjoy watching violent media and think they are resistant to its negative effects, it can be challenging teaching them about the damaging consequences of violence (Bushman, 2018). The media violence exposure has far-reaching negative consequences on their behavior, emotions, and social development. Media has a powerful influence on shaping children's

perceptions of the world, and it is crucial to ensure that this influence promotes values of empathy, kindness, and peace rather than aggression and hostility. By fostering a media-literate environment, setting limits on violent content, and promoting positive and educational media information, society can help safeguard children from the harmful effects of media violence.

The main selection criterion for the theoretical framework was the evaluation of a media product on young audience - children and adolescents. The inclusion of child-centered research ensures that the article remains focused on understanding how children, due to their cognitive, emotional, and social developmental stages, uniquely interpret violent content. Withal, given that the effects of media violence on children intersect with various disciplines - such as psychology, sociology, health, media studies, and education - sources from multiple fields were considered. It was ensured that all the selected articles were methodologically sound and presented relevant data, ultimately supporting a balanced, nuanced, and well-informed argument.

Content television

Television has long been a powerful source of both information and entertainment. However, concerns regarding its possible effects on children have been raised by the growing amount of violent content available on television. Gunter et al. (2003) noted that the major problem „is about children staying up late at night to watch television, often watching programs deemed to be unsuitable for them by regulators" (p. 157). Additionally, in Zafar and Chaudhary's study (2023), more than half of the respondents stated that the media world affected their children's personalities. In addition, many of them have unrestricted access to television, which means that they can access content that exceeds their age and ability to understand the information at any time.

Violence depicted on television can easily serve as a facilitator in children's moments of anger. They can imagine a different power dynamic and reproduce whole scenes that they previously viewed. However, we must distinguish here between the violence seen in animated films or action films and the violence captured in daily news reports. The specialized literature shows many negative effects produced by violence from the media, with three of the most significant being „learning aggressive thoughts and behaviors, emotional desensitization,

and fear" (Hamilton, 2000, 26). Hence, children may become less sensitive to the suffering of others. This phenomenon can lead them to perceive violence as a normal means of resolving conflicts, which may result to aggressive behavior and a diminished capacity for empathy.

Moreover, the negative effects of exposure to violence are not limited to childhood and can influence the individual's behavior and attitudes in adulthood. Young people who were exposed to violence on television during their formative years may develop a distorted view of interpersonal relationships, have difficulties in managing anger, or be more prone to antisocial behavior. Furthermore, they often find it challenging to cultivate a healthy understanding of the difference between fact and fiction, good and bad behavior, entertainment, and inappropriate content.

Cartoons

Children spend a lot of time watching cartoons, and this can be considered a form of homeschooling that alters their mental balance, often exposing them to violent and even sexual content (Habib & Soliman, 2015). More than that, younger children do not easily differentiate between fact and fiction and become more attentive to what characters do and look like, while older children can understand finer concepts such as purpose, motives, and feelings (Wilson, 2008). Generally, cartoons with constant activity, chaos, and violent conduct can overstimulate young viewers, making it tough for them to regulate their emotions. Frequently, these violent cartoons contain fast-paced scenes enriched with intense music, boisterous sounds, and exaggerated physical clashes. For children who are in the process of mastering their emotional control, such stimulation can result in heightened levels of nervousness, agitation, or aggression.

One of the most pressing concerns with children spending extended periods watching cartoons is the sedentary nature of the activity. Long hours spent watching cartoons may also disrupt sleep patterns, leading to fatigue and reduced concentration in school. As a result, children may struggle with focusing on school-related activities.

In opposition to violent cartoons, prosocial cartoons have positive effects on children's behaviors, such as the possibility of reducing aggression, learning cooperation, bringing benefits in relationships with others, but with restraint (Zhang et al., 2020). Hence, instead of banning cartoons, parents can choose the appropriate ones

for their children. However, it is not valid in every situation, as many heroic scenes depict good outcomes achieved through collateral damage. Additionally, cartoons often portray exaggerated or unrealistic interactions between characters, which can distort children's understanding of social behavior. Consequently, while some cartoons promote aggression, lying, bad roles, superstitions, and impairments in vision and hearing, others can yield positive effects, such as promoting respect, creativity, laughter, language development, and supporting good health (Parvin & Islam, 2020). Thus, it is essential to differentiate between these varying influences.

Horror movies

Horror movies are generally not designed for children due to their emotional, psychological, and cognitive effects. Scary scenes, and unsettling plotlines can trigger intense fear responses, leading to nightmares, insomnia, a desire to be alone, anxiety and fear, negative thoughts, and behavior problems (Esa et al., 2023). Younger children, in particular, become more susceptible to believing that the terrifying scenes they witness on screen could occur in real life. This fear can cause children to become overly cautious, developing irrational fears about things like the dark or monsters.

Riddle & Moyer-Gusé (2009) stated that „in the case of horror movies in particular, a lack of understanding of the importance of scary music and point-of-view shots could lead to an increase in fear levels in children" (p. 21). In other words, children have fewer contacts with the real world compared to adults, being in the years of knowing the world around them and in a process of self-knowledge at the same time. Consequently, managing certain emotions, such as fear, can become challenging for some children after consuming violent content in mass media. This exposure may lead to increased anxiety or withdrawal, causing them to believe that danger lurks around every corner. Such constant exposure can undermine their ability to develop healthy coping and resilience mechanisms in the face of challenges.

In addition, Martin (2019) highlighted that low empathy is associated with the desire and pleasure of watching a horror movie, but this category of audience includes more boys and men (Martin, 2019). If boys watch horror movies a lot, they may start to focus less on the characters' deep emotional experiences, being more attracted to the rush of adrenaline or thrill of fear. This could hinder their ability to develop

empathy or to care about the pain they observe in others. Besides this, boys are frequently encouraged by cultural stereotypes to repress feelings of fear, vulnerability, or melancholy, providing them with an outlet for expressing dominance, which is a false trait equated with masculine ideals.

News

The impact of violent news on children, particularly from television, is multifaceted and significant. The issue of news content has been well-known for a long time, with reports of violence involving foreigners, foreign wars, famine, and natural disasters being just some of the categories that scare children (Cantor & Nathanson, 1996), many news promoting an „increasingly realistic, dramatic, and shocking content" (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017, 117).

Compared to adults, children's ability to understand and filter information related to shocking violence and terrorism in the news is more sensitive. This heightened sensitivity can lead to chronic stress, particularly in children who lack a normal, supportive, and equitable family environment, making them even more vulnerable (Leiner et al., 2016). For instance, in Riddle et al. (2012), the findings indicated that 35.3% of kids said the news scared them, some children vividly recall graphic news stories.

Violent information from the news produces more worry and fear compared to violence from fiction, as many children recognize that the facts in the news are real, and some of them start to fear that bad things might also happen to them (van der Molen & Bushman, 2008). In other words, children may struggle to differentiate between events happening far away and their own safety, leading to heightened stress levels and fear of similar events occurring to themselves or their loved ones. News about crimes impacts the emotional response of children, instilling fear that is amplified by the absence of relevant visual support (Smith & Wilson, 2000). This can be motivated by the fact that children's minds create strong negative scenarios, while the images broadcast on television are moderate in terms of violent impact. Realizing that news is serious, they get scared, starting crying, acting nervous, having trouble sleeping, nightmares, stomach pain, obsessive thoughts about violence and war, obsessive discussions, making drawings about war, and more. These reactions tend to be more intense among girls (Kandemir-Ozdinc & Erdur-Baker, 2013).

Video games

While video games can offer various benefits, including cognitive development and entertainment, parents and caregivers should also be aware of the potential negative impacts on children. In this regard, meta-analyses confirm that video games, regardless of their nature, have both long-term and short-term effects on social behavior (Anderson et al., 2010; Greitemeyer & Mügge, 2014). Prolonged exposure to violent games may desensitize children to real-world violence, leading to increased aggression. It can also lead to sedentary lifestyles, which can contribute to obesity and related health problems, as well as poorer academic performance due to interference with homework, study time, and sleep schedules. Furthermore, excessive gaming may reduce opportunities for face-to-face interactions and the development of interpersonal skills. Compared to violence in movies or cartoons, in video games children are virtual participants in acts of violence. In these virtual environments, they gain powers, which can foster feelings of dominance, anger and a desire for revenge. Besides, there is a strong association between exposure to violent video games and television and the diagnosis of Disruptive Behavior Disorder among adolescents (Kronenberger et al., 2005).

On the other hand, a different approach is presented by Harrington & O'Connell (2016), who demonstrate that engaging with prosocial video games can enhance the level of empathy and the affective dimension, thereby improving social relationships between young people. This happens because prosocial video games typically present scenarios where players must consider others' perspectives, make ethical decisions, and engage in cooperative behaviors, often to achieve a common goal. By interacting with these uplifting and virtual emotions, players may learn to feel more in tune with both their own and other people's emotions.

Music lyrics

Violent lyrics have sparked significant debate. Many argue that violent lyrics are a form of creative expression, while others express concern about their potential negative influence on listeners. While music is an undeniably art form, violent lyrics can have both short-term and long-term effects on listeners, shaping their behavior, attitudes, and perceptions of violence in subtle and overt ways, especially on children.

Lyrics are often a reflection of society issues, including violence, because they frequently reflect the world from which they originate. Genres such as rap, heavy metal, and punk rock have a long history of using violent words to express rebellion, rage, and frustration. It has been shown that music with violent lyrics also influences the behavior of the listeners, causing them to become aggressive (Anderson et al., 2003; Brummert Lennings & Warburton, 2015). Aggressive cognitions and anger were the skills emphasized by the authors Pieschl & Fegers (2016) following the evaluation of violent lyrics in music. In contrast, music with prosocial lyrics brings consistent beneficial effects (Warburton et al., 2024), reducing aggression (Greitemeyer, 2011).

However, emotions, attitudes, and behaviors can be influenced by song lyrics. These effects are mediated by the listener's personality, cultural background, and personal interpretation of the lyrics, among other factors. For some individuals, listening to violent music provides a safe place to express their feelings or a way to let out their frustrations. Many artists emphasize that their violent lyrics are not meant to encourage actual violence but rather are imaginary or metaphorical.

Social media platforms

In today's digital age, social media has become an essential part of everyday life, impacting how people express themselves, communicate, and share information. While social media platforms were initially designed for adults and teenagers, more and more children are using them. A significant concern is that these platforms can create addiction, leading to an unconscious increase in the amount of time spent online.

While these platforms offer a space for connection, they also expose young people to cyberbullying and pressure to conform to unrealistic standards most of the time. Children may be exposed to inappropriate content and dangerous trends. They can easily come across violent, sexual, or harmful content that is not suitable for their age. Despite content moderation efforts, parental controls and platform guidelines are often insufficient to fully protect them from these risks. Young people are becoming more and more exposed to online violence, which can make them become very violent instead (Patton et al., 2014). Along with the risk of anxiety and depression, social media can also lead young people to multiple addictions and serious unhealthy eating habits (Bozzola et al., 2022).

Social media has also changed the conflicting experiences of teenagers, where various forms of disrespect, including pictures, videos or live-streamed videos or comments are transposed into real life (Elsaesser et al., 2021). In the past, conflicts among teens were mostly confined to in-person interactions at school or within social circles. However, today, social media amplifies these conflicts, allowing them to spread far beyond their original context and reach a much larger, often uncontrollable, digital audience. The comments, images, or videos that humiliate someone can go viral because they attract attention, likes, and comments, fueling the desire to "perform" for an audience.

Therefore, children's use of social media also raises significant concerns about privacy and safety, as they are often unaware of privacy settings and may share personal information that can later be exploited.

Behavior impact

Exposure to media violence can lead young people to a decline in academic performance, attention, and inner motivation (Fitzpatrick et al., 2012). The longer children and adolescents engage with screens, the more they may develop an addiction, which over time can manifest as symptoms of depression, reduced sleep quality, and behaviors associated with ADHD. Additionally, they may experience various physical symptoms that are difficult to overlook, including high blood pressure, obesity, vision problems, and low bone density (Lissak, 2018). For preschoolers, spending more than two hours in front of screens significantly contributes to attention problems and exacerbates behavioral issues (Tamana et al., 2019).

Moreover, exposure to media violence can greatly increase anger, and anger can be expressed through violent displays (Han et al., 2020). Additionally, youth who already exhibit aggressive tendencies choose to access the violent part of the media, which in turn exacerbates their aggression (Slater et al., 2003). The more 6- to 10-year-olds watch horror or violent movies and play video games on computers in early adolescence, the more aggressive and violent they become at the age of 14, when risking delinquency (Hopf et al., 2008). However, Smith and Wilson (2002) noted that while violent images may disturb all children who watch them, the youngest are less aware and less deeply affected by what they see. Despite this, most media experts think that violent media can make young people more aggressive, although there is no consensus on the extent of this effect on the exact age (Bushman, 2015).

At the same time, aggressive attitudes have been linked with both movies and video games, both gradually leading to desensitization (Funk et al., 2005). This assertion is further supported by Carnagey et al. (2007), who stated that violence in the media produces desensitization even during violent or challenging moments encountered in real life, disconnecting people from reality. Another negative effect consists in increasing the tendency of children or adolescents to look for aggressive individuals in social environments, who do not behave according to the norms, which can lead to further acts of violence in real life (Huesmann, 2007). Media violence also causes anxiety to most of them (Madan et al., 2014), and the quality of social behavior decreases with it, children risking being isolated and rejected by others at school (Gentile et al., 2011).

Violence in media also influences early alcohol and tobacco consumption, as well as premature sexual activity (Villani, 2001). Unfortunately, sexualized images, dialogues, and relationships portrayed in the media are often depicted without showing the emotional, physical, or legal consequences. This can lead to skewed perceptions of sexual relationships and contribute to the early initiation of sexual activity.

Parental involvement

Parents' awareness and documentation about the nature and implications of the media can significantly benefit children, effectively protecting them when necessary (Al-Ali et al., 2018). Fair and age-appropriate parenting is one of the main solutions for both children and adolescents regarding the effects of violence they may encounter through media access (Li, 2023). On physical, social, and academic levels, parents can exert a significant influence on the impact of media on children. It is important to distinguish the difference between monitoring and effective involvement, as the situation can worsen if things are not managed properly (Gentile et al., 2014). A strong parent-child bond fosters open communication, and if children perceive their parents as approachable and supportive, they are more inclined to talk to them about unpleasant media content. This discussion can also happen when parents watch shows or play video games with their children, approaching violent scenes or other inappropriate scenes in real time. Such active involvement facilitates immediate discussion and context-setting, helping children interpret what they see.

In the case of preschoolers, watching media violence also contributes to a decrease in emotional self-regulation and inattention.

However, if parents intervene promptly, the risk of this exposure leading to aggressive behavior in childhood and adolescence is significantly reduced (Fitzpatrick et al., 2016). Especially with preschoolers, parents should avoid habits such as calming down their children by offering them a phone or looking at inappropriate content on television when children are present (Swider-Cios et al., 2023).

Rega et al. (2023) concluded that despite prolonged contact with the media during the Covid-19 pandemic, the associated problems did not increase and remained equally concerning. The same authors also emphasize the strong ameliorative effect of the parental intervention; if the family environment is dysfunctional, then the negative impact of the familiar environment is significant. However, due to the widespread use of media, children can still be indirectly influenced by their peers or social circles, even in the presence of parental controls. It is becoming increasingly difficult to limit exposure, as children are encountering inappropriate content at younger and younger ages.

Limitations

The current study is based on literature analysis. While the framework provides valuable insights, future practical implementation requires further refinement. Although extensive research has been conducted on this topic, more needs to be done to understand it, as the media is a dynamic and complex phenomenon. More studies should be conducted in order to develop intervention strategies addressing the negative effects, which could potentially be integrated into national education systems.

Conclusions

It is widely argued that children's exposure to violence in any environment or context has negative effects that cannot be ignored (Singer et al., 2004). However, when studying media violence, it is essential to take into consideration youth characteristics. While anyone can be influenced by media, leading to the imitation of various behaviors, the impact is often shaped by factors such as age, psychological traits, and the nature of the media material (Wiedeman et al., 2015). This remains a complex phenomenon, but it is clear that violent content is closely linked to the aggressiveness of the individual who consumes it (Bender et al., 2018). It is also crucial for educators and policymakers to be aware of the media that young people engage with,

as parental mediation can help mitigate some of these negative effects. Encouraging more positive, educational, and empathetic media content can support children's healthy development and foster a culture of non-violence in their daily interactions.

At the end, another effective way to counteract the negative effects of media exposure is by teaching children media literacy - helping them critically evaluate the content they consume and understand the motives behind it. Young people can be taught coping strategies for dealing with fear, anxiety, or aggression that may arise from violent media exposure. This is essential because children access media content even outside the home. Schools, public places, and friends' houses offer access to television and to the internet, making it more challenging for parents to control what their children see when they are not directly under their supervision. More than that, children must learn independence as they get older, which includes using media on their own. Hence, media literacy helps in finding the ideal balance between shielding children from inappropriate material and giving them the freedom to explore and absorb good knowledge from the media world. The insights presented here contribute to educational innovation by suggesting that a holistic, nuanced understanding of media effects must guide how media literacy programs are designed and implemented in schools.

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