

Today we are living in an ever-changing world of a digital era. There is no escape from the mass media. It surrounds us and even plays a part in the youngest of children's lives. Media can be used as a simple solution and a go to vice, to help keep children occupied and entertained, while the parents/care givers juggle their busy day-to-day lives. Cartoons and superheroes are a big part of childhood. While these programmes can show cognitive development, educational and language acquisition, they can also display violent and aggressive behaviours. This essay looks at, to what extent does exposure to media, specifically cartoons and superhero culture play a part in behaviour and aggression levels in children, in the short and long term. Looking at the effects of violent content, the relationship with television viewing and the psychological and physical impact it has on a child's wellbeing. Banduras (1977) social learning theory of observing, imitating and displaying learned behaviours and how this applies to media viewing in children. Also looking at a study by professor (Coyne, 2017) conducted to see what children absorbed from superhero culture and the parents' opinion on how much their children identified with their favourite superhero.

Research shows that media coverage on violence and aggression has both a short term and a long-term increasing effect on aggression and violence in the younger generation. Whatever children read or watch in early childhood will influence and make an impression on them, they will apply and use their early knowledge throughout their lives (Burke, 2000; Evans, Myers, & Ilfeld, 2000; Penn, 2000). Malik, Hassan, and Sultana (2004) assert that children reinforce and inspire latent attitudes, and that new attitudes are formulated from the use of electronic media. In 2000 the Federal Bureau of Investigation in America released a report stating that media violence was a risk factor in shootings at schools. When a child is exposed to an elevated level of media content it gives the media opportunity and time to make an impression on the viewers attitudes and actions. This gives the media a greater control, to be educators of the world and on how people behave and respond, over other significant role models such as parents and teachers. Some studies have shown that there is a greater likelihood that the more realistically that violence is portrayed it becomes more accepted and tolerated. Portraying violence in comic form is particularly dangerous to children as they can see associate the feeling of positivity with hurting others. Being exposed to multimedia with violent content can have a profound impact on some children causing social isolation, nightmares, sleeping disorders depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorders.

Albert bandura (1977) social learning theory suggests that we learn from our environment observing, imitating, and displaying behaviours that are observed. He highlights this in his famous bobo doll experiment (Bandura. 1961). He believed that behaviourism could not solely explain all there is about learning, and that the environment plays a part in influencing and being influenced by the world around us. Bandura observed the changes in behaviour in children after being exposed to adults acting out violence, this then led him to his social learning theory. He believed that self-regulation is needed to control our own behaviour, this consists of self-observation, making judgment on ourselves and the environment, then our response. When an observer's response changes after witnessing the behaviour or act of a model, then this is when social learning theory occurs. When children observe an adult being violent towards another adult not only can they then imitate the behaviour, but they can see it as being a socially acceptable way to behave and respond (Bushman and Hausman 2010). Children enter many sources of social interaction be it with Parents, siblings, or peers in the playground, they are continually observing fictional characters through multimedia devices they pick up and display the behaviours themselves (Bandura, 2001). According to Shaffer (2005) people learn from one another via observation, imitation, and modelling.

Psychological and physical wellbeing have been the focus in studies on children and their media viewing looking at their relationship between television viewing and the effects it has on their behaviour and attitudes, cognitively and physically. Research studies have shown that watching media with violent content is an independent factor that contributes to the development of aggressive behaviour. Experimental and longitudinal theoretical studies have been carried out looking to explain the effects of viewing violent media content and the connection to aggressive behaviour later in life. The frameworks of observational learning and imitation discuss the relationship between intensive exposure to media violence and more frequent media viewing demonstrating aggressive behaviour later in life.

By observing physical aggressive behaviours such as hitting, kicking, elbowing, or wrestling in children who were exposed to violent or non-violent film viewing while playing in a room together. (Bjorkqvist, 1985) was able to obtain data for experimental research. Two independents were placed in the room with the children. They then rated their behaviours. They did not know which children had watched the violent and the non-violent films. They concluded that children who watched the violent film showed much higher levels of aggression and physical violence than the children who watched the non-violent film.

Before the age of 4 years old children are not able to differentiate between fantasy and reality so being exposed to violence while viewing television, they can view this as being a normal phenomenon and do not understand the detrimental effects and harm it can cause. Cartoons are a big part of childhood and growing up while they can be magical and fun to children, some characters can become role models where the children look up to and admire them and innocently aspiring to be like them. Children can be easily consumed by a character, watching the movies, owning various toys/merchandise, playing dress up and imitating the characteristics and the behaviours the characters display. Most cartoons are hero and villain based with both the hero and villain expressing violence towards each other. According to the gender development social cognitive theory (Bussey and Bandura 1999) the media affects will be stronger when the characters are of the same sex as the viewer. The majority of superhero's are male, and both the male and female superheroes display masculine behaviours and traits (Baker and Raney 2007) The hero is often rewarded for their violent behaviour and actions. Children can often see it to be trendy or cool to act in this way and to carry weapons of harm and destruction. This could encourage or tempt children to behave in a similarly violent way.

Professor Sarah M Coyne (2017) conducted a study on preschool aged boys and girls to determine what the children absorbed and took away from exposure to superhero culture. While the cartoon content does show some good and helpful behaviours for example fighting for a cause, showing bravery, and defending the venerable and the weak, the study showed that the children were more susceptible to the behaviours of aggression than they were to the behaviours of defence. Coyne found that the more habitually the children engage in the superhero culture they were more likely to be relationally and more physically aggressive one year later in life. Concerningly she also found that children were less likely to help and defend others who were being bullied or picked on and they were less likely to be prosocial. Coyne theorizes that superhero programmes are not produced to be watched by preschool age children and that the storylines are overly complex and portray prosocial, violent, and aggressive behaviour. Superhero programmes are not targeted toward preschool age but are very much consumed by this age group especially in boys (Brown et al. 2009). Cognitively children are incapable of being able to see the wider moral picture that is often being portrayed within the storyline, so it is easier for them to notice the violent behaviours and

actions that they see. Coyne also states that consuming violent media can cause a reduction and desensitization emotionally and cognitively seeing a reduction in the response to violence toward the victims. This could contribute to a lack of care and empathy toward victims of violence that they may come across in their day-to-day environment. Many parents and school settings encourage children to become defenders of victimized peers or siblings and is commonly portrayed by the media. The study “Pow! Boom! Kablam! Effects of Viewing Superhero Programmes on Aggressive, Prosocial, and Defending Behaviours in Preschool children” was conducted by (Coyne, 2017). 240 preschool children (49%) male and their parents who could answer honestly about the level of engagement the children had with superhero culture at two different time points, took part. The parents were asked how much their child identified with superhero's and how often did they watch superhero media? 28% of parents reported that they felt the superheroes had a positive influence on their children and only 12% of parents surveyed said that the influence was negative. The 60% of parents remaining had an indifferent or mixed response to the way that superheroes influenced their children. Past research shows that parents are more likely to underreport than they are likely to overreport (Achenbach et al, 1987). The children were interviewed and asked what of their knowledge on superheroes and could they identify 10 different superheroes. They were asked who their favourite superhero and why did they favour that one so much. Important insight to the study was gained from the children's response to the questions they were given. The responses included 26% was because of superhero merchandise available 20% from the image they portrayed and 21% for interpersonal characteristics. A subcode was used to study any violent or defending themes. 20% of the children associated violence with their favourite superhero saying things like “he is my favourite because he smashes and punches things” this being a milder response, and some answers were more alarming in saying “I like him because he kills a lot of people”. The 70% of skills related answers left by the children were harmless and benign in nature with comments such as “he is really cool because he can make himself invisible and he can fly”. It was found that one-year later with the engagement of superheroes by the preschool children, it was related to an increase in their relational and aggressive behaviours, however the more prosocial and defending behaviours were not found to be evident in their behaviours. Media effects research has shown in its findings that when identifying with characters that are prosocial or aggressive it can lead to higher replication of behaviours (Konijn et al. 2007). These effects have been shown in longitudinally (Bushman and Huesmann 2006) and in the short term (Bushman and Anderson 2001). According to the general aggression model (GAM; Anderson and Bushman 2002) and its extension the general learning model (GLM; Buckley and Anderson 2006) exposure and engagement with superhero content may be associated in the short- and long-term effects of behaviour.

A longitudinal study was conducted to determine the levels of engagement with superheroes and to examine the behaviours of prosocial, aggression and defence. Rubinstein (2004) describes there are two types of defenders (1) who are more often male figures that use aggression aimed at the bullies to obstruct any further offences by being antisocial and aggressive. (2) mostly in the form of females being prosocial nonaggressive, befriending the victim by verbally defending them and they are more likely to seek help and advice from an adult peer (e.g., a parent or teacher). During the developmental stage it is common to experience several types of aggressive behaviours this period creates many opportunities for pre-schoolers to help and defend themselves or peers if they wish to do so (Ostrov and Keating 2004). Social aggression which tends to inflict emotional rather than physical harm is seen more in girls than boys (Spieker, Campbell and Vandergrift et al., 2012).

In the results of over 2000 reviews and studies conducted the evidence shows that in certain children and adolescents the persistent exposure to media violence increases the risk of aggressive behaviour, it can lead them to believe that “the world is a much crueller and terrifying place to live” and it can numb them towards violence and violent acts (Strasburger, Wilson and Jordan, 2014). Preschool and school age children spend on average watching television between 2 and 4 hours a day. Programmes that are aired prime time in the evenings, show within each hour an average of five violent acts are portrayed, more worryingly on children's Saturday morning cartoon time there are on average 20-25 violent acts portrayed within each hourly period. A higher frequency of violence is portrayed in children's programs evidently more so than in music videos, reality television and comedy show (Gentile, Saleem and Anderson 2007). The American Academy of Paediatrics recommends that children preschool age should be supervised so someone is on hand to help the child to understand right or wrong behaviours and they will have a better understanding of the storyline being portrayed.

In conclusion there is a large amount of evidence to suggest that engaging and watching television, cartoons and superheroes has a profound effect on children's behaviour and aggression levels. In the findings of Banduras (1977) social learning theory the evidence shows that children observe, imitate and display learned observed behaviours, this relates to children watching and imitating behaviours that they see in displayed by cartoon/superhero characters. While the storylines of cartoons and superheroes can portray some positive attributes, showing bravery and defending the vulnerable and weak, children are more susceptible to the more aggressive and violent behaviours and are less likely to notice any prosocial behaviours. Consuming violent media can desensitize children both emotionally and cognitively. Viewing such behaviours, a child can worryingly portray these actions/behaviours as being a socially acceptable way to behave. Current findings are persistent with past research showing that exposure to aggressive and violent media content can result in an increase of imitation of violent and aggressive behaviours. It has been found that social aggression is more evident in girls than in boys. It is recommended that preschool children are supervised while watching television so the content can be explained, they can have a better understanding of the storyline and right and wrong behaviours can be pointed out while viewing.

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