

To what extent does the media contribute towards violent and aggressive behaviour in an individual? Discuss regarding psychological theory and evidence.

The following essay will establish that the media partially contributes to violent behaviour in vulnerable individuals. Media contribution to violence is an important topic due to controversies arising from violent incidents linked to various media outlets (Armstrong, 2019; Bender et al., 2018; Fuld et al., 2009). Although violent behaviour is a complicated metric to analyse; in this piece, the definition is behaviour causing extreme physical or emotional harm to the self or others (Anderson & Bushman, 2018; Bandura, 1971). The focus of this essay will be on the theories of psychologists and their research based on the effects of violent media: This incorporates the era of television, social media and video games, as the majority of research conducted recently, and the bulk of exposure to media, is in these three formats (Bandura, 1971; Buglass et al., 2016; Fuld et al., 2009; Slater, 2015). Comparisons between the modern era and historical eras will provide context on humankind's violence levels. It is poignant to recognise that semantically, media can take the form of any tool used by humans to communicate with other individuals, from cave paintings to tribal dances, and whilst further analysis could be pertinent, these formats will not undergo evaluation in this piece. This essay will outline critical theories that developed whilst researching media and violence relationships including Bandura's Social Learning Theory (SLT) or Social Cognition Theory (SCT), Ferguson's Catalyst Model (CM), and the Moral Panic Theory (MPT) (Bandura, 1971, 2018; Ferguson, 2015; Ferguson & Olson, 2014; Furedi, 2016; Rohloff & Wright, 2010). This essay will also assess the General Aggression Model (GAM), the Reinforcing Spiral Model (RSM) and the Differential Susceptibility to Media Effects Model (DSMM), models for measuring contributing factors of aggression and violence (Anderson & Bushman, 2018; Dewall et al., 2011; Slater, 2015; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013).

The primary theory examined is Bandura's SLT or SCT, initially contrived in 1966 and developed continually to the present day (Bandura, 1971). As shown in the "Bobo Doll Experiment" (1966), Bandura established (partly due to Behaviourism being en vogue) that children could be "taught" or conditioned to use violence by presenting them a model acting violently (Bandura, 1971, 2018; Dogutas, 2013; Myers, 2000). One of the main components of SCT states that humans can learn behaviours observationally, symbolically, and through either internal or external

reinforcement (Bandura, 1971, 2018). Whilst more nuanced than this essay can examine, Bandura established that contrary to the thought in the 50s and 60s, violent media could negatively influence behaviour (Bandura, 1971, 2018; Dogutas, 2013; Fuld et al., 2009). There are several limitations; SCT is a broad lens to observe through, whilst children did copy the models presented to them, they are categorised as cognitively vulnerable individuals; highly susceptible to others' influence (Bender et al., 2018; Ferguson, 2015; Fuld et al., 2009; Sukhodolsky et al., 2016). The theory increases its validity by testing on adults; however, it is unclear to what extent media influences individuals with full cognitive capacity in a simulated setting (Bandura, 2018; Dewall et al., 2011; Patton et al., 2019; Sukhodolsky et al., 2016). Although not limited to these incidences, two examples of SCT taking place in a real-world environment are: Concentration camp guards abusing prisoners because of the normality of such an occurrence in WW2, and police abusing Arab suspects in Palestine during the 1950s (Bandura, 1971, 2018; Chomsky, 2000). These examples are pertinent due to the long-term entrenchment of violence towards alternative ethnic groups utilised and normalised by the Nazi and the Israeli media (Chomsky, 2000; Myers, 2000; Slater, 2015; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). Another limitation of SCT is the dismissal of inherent violent behaviours (Buss, 2016; Dogutas, 2013; Myers, 2000; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). Nativists and evolutionary psychologists argue that violent behaviour is something humans and animals display with limited social interactions; indeed, some animals raised in relative isolation are amongst the most aggressive (Buss, 2016; Chomsky, 2000). Snow leopards (*Panthera uncia*) and shoebill storks (*Balaeniceps rex*) although perhaps influenced parentally, are particularly hostile to members of the same species, siblings, and aliens (Attenborough, 2013; 2016). Whilst Bandura's work does have limitations; it is evidentially robust, reliable and reasonably ecologically valid in its interpretation of media effects on violence and therefore remains one of the more steadfast theories associated with this topic (Anderson & Bushman, 2018; Bandura, 1971, 2018; Buglass et al., 2016; Dogutas, 2013; Myers, 2000; Zimmerman & Bell, 2010).

The second theory examined will be Ferguson et al.'s CM. This theory declares that violent media exposure is typical rather than extraordinary and that the effects are nominal compared to societal and genetic influences (Ferguson, 2015; Ferguson & Olson, 2014). Ferguson's writings also state that possible cathartic effects are seen in

individuals with attention-deficit traits and trait aggression whilst playing violent video games (Ferguson & Olson, 2014). However, Ferguson caveats that it does not extend to all individuals, only those with the traits mentioned above (Ferguson, 2015; Ferguson & Olson, 2014). The CM is an empirical minority, overwhelmingly research finds violent media increases violent behaviour and many academics achieve oppositional results in their work (Bandura, 1971; Buglass et al., 2016; Dogutas, 2013; Myers, 2000; Slater, 2015). Ferguson counters this point by stating that the variables used in others' research do not record violence and aggression traits reliably; perceived violent behavioural traits could be competitiveness or considered mild compared to extreme violence (Ferguson, 2015; Ferguson & Olson, 2014). Ferguson's work primarily focusses on video games, compared with TV and SM the process of playing involves active knowledge of the violence levels about to be witnessed, which may explain why violence levels do not significantly alter during the process, along with self-reporting being a primary method of data collection (Anderson & Bushman, 2018; Ferguson, 2015; Ferguson & Olson, 2014; Myers, 2000).

Cohen (1972) and Young (1971) were the initial pioneers behind MPT (Furedi, 2016; Rohloff & Wright, 2010). MPT tries to explain social, behavioural, and political events by analysing the reaction (or overreaction) to them, primarily to uncover the processes that cause 'Moral Panic' (Furedi, 2016; Rohloff & Wright, 2010). MPT concerning media violence has various connotations for psychological research. When applied through MPT, media violence outcomes on behaviour are negligible or sinister (Furedi, 2016; Rohloff & Wright, 2010). Regardless of the functional mechanism, the causality traces back to MPT and is often overlooked or missed during research on subjects' traits and characteristics if the research parameters do not encompass causal factors (Furedi, 2016; Rohloff & Wright, 2010). MPT is utilised most often as a political smokescreen; establishments can charge minority sections of society and individuals with moral discrepancies, rather than alter their policies to rectify political grievances that may interfere with influential financial backers, or the media's interests (Furedi, 2016; Rohloff & Wright, 2010). One example of MPT being used to deflect attention away from real societal issues is the Columbine massacre. Consumption of violent media was condemned rather than the presenting of violent media, gun-control laws, or mental-health awareness and provision (Kaufman, 2018). MPT is relevant to media violence because it is an establishment tool used to

accredit responsibility, not on those who provide, but on those who consume violent media, potentially exacerbating the effects of media violence, and overvaluing the responsibility of individuals to cater for their own needs rather than investigate the genuine relationship between policy and outcome (Furedi, 2016; Rohloff & Wright, 2010).

RSM determines media choices with identity congruence and identity with supporting media (Slater, 2015; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). An individual chooses media that supports their beliefs, and that media, in turn, validates those beliefs, which increases the likelihood of the individual reusing the media, until stasis or complete agreement is achieved (Slater, 2015; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). Complicity is not predetermined, and disagreements will push media users towards other media forms (Buglass et al., 2016; Slater, 2015). In the context of media violence, RSM indicates a harrowing pattern; a violent individual will seek out violent media, and once this media validates these traits, they return until they are satisfied with the violence levels the media presents. If the media and the individual cannot find stasis, ideological congruence can only occur after the individual has escalated beyond the violence level, potentially harming others in the process (Buglass et al., 2016; Myers, 2000; Slater, 2015). The extent to which media affects violent behaviour in this model is the allowance for escalation; the more graphic the media content, the more likely that it will not satiate the violent individual, and will have simultaneously primed them for extreme violence, and not satisfied them with enough (Buglass et al., 2016; Dogutas, 2013; Myers, 2000; Slater, 2015; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013).

The GAM attempts to quantify an individual's behaviour concerning their personality, situation, and cognitive state (Anderson & Bushman, 2018; Dewall et al., 2011). The GAM's connotations regarding violent media consumption depict that if a person displays aggressive traits and has undergone priming by violent media and places themselves into a stressful situation, they are significantly more likely to produce violent behaviour than an individual with none of these factors (Anderson & Bushman, 2018; Dewall et al., 2011). The primary application of the GAM is studying intimate partner violence, climate-related violence, suicide, and intergroup violence (Anderson & Bushman, 2018; Dewall et al., 2011).

The DSMM aims to explain why some individuals are more susceptible to media effects than others, why they are sensitive, and how to mitigate and enhance these

effects (Bender et al., 2018; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013; Zhao & Zhou, 2020). The DSMM has three levels of subject susceptibility to media effects and three types of media responses. These are dispositional, developmental, and social susceptibility, and excitative, cognitive, and emotional response states (Bender et al., 2018; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013; Zhao & Zhou, 2020). The model identifies multiple micro-media effects upon an individual and integrates them to demonstrate the media's full effects on their behaviour (Bender et al., 2018; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013; Zhao & Zhou, 2020). The model incorporates ideas and effect-measuring from over 15 different media effect theories, including SCT and RSM (Bender et al., 2018; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013; Zhao & Zhou, 2020).

A repeating theme amongst the researchers studied is that violent media affects the vulnerable public more than non-vulnerable individuals (Armstrong, 2019; Bandura, 2018; Bender et al., 2018; Buglass et al., 2016; Dogutas, 2013; Ferguson, 2015; Ferguson & Olson, 2014; Fuld et al., 2009; P. Correa et al., 2021; Patton et al., 2019; Stefanone et al., 2010; Sukhodolsky et al., 2016; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). Vulnerable people include children and adolescents, people with mental illnesses, individuals from disadvantageous backgrounds such as abusive or latch-key homes, individuals who live in detrimental social settings, people of colour, and individuals from homes where incarceration of one or both parents during childhood occurs (Armstrong, 2019; Bandura, 2018; Bender et al., 2018; Buglass et al., 2016; Dogutas, 2013; Ferguson, 2015; Ferguson & Olson, 2014; Fuld et al., 2009; P. Correa et al., 2021; Patton et al., 2019; Stefanone et al., 2010; Sukhodolsky et al., 2016; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). In general, media violence effects become exacerbated in these groups due to media having more influence on these groups as a substitute to other social influences, particularly children when a parent is absent, abusive or busy ((Armstrong, 2019; Bandura, 2018; Bender et al., 2018; Buglass et al., 2016; Dogutas, 2013; Ferguson, 2015; Ferguson & Olson, 2014; Fuld et al., 2009; P. Correa et al., 2021; Patton et al., 2019; Stefanone et al., 2010; Sukhodolsky et al., 2016; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). Social influence is not wholly a media issue as negative social influencers such as abusive step-parents, or youth gangs can also affect these vulnerable groups and encourage them to violence; yet, the correlation remains that more media influence leads to more violent behaviour (Armstrong, 2019; Bandura, 2018; Bender et al., 2018; Buglass et al., 2016; Dogutas, 2013; Ferguson, 2015; Ferguson & Olson, 2014; Fuld et al., 2009; P. Correa et al., 2021; Patton et al., 2019; Stefanone et al., 2010; Sukhodolsky et al., 2016; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013).

Suicide is violence against the self, attaining the mentality to achieve this involves removing the fear of mortality and pain (Anderson & Bushman, 2018; Dewall et al., 2011). Suicide victims are likely to become desensitised to violence by viewing violent images and film, and long-term exposure to violent content increases the likelihood of suicide (Anderson & Bushman, 2018; Dewall et al., 2011). The effects of violent media content regarding potentially suicidal individuals are striking, due to it not only influencing the victim as per SCT, RSM, DSMM, and MPT but being wholly necessary for the victim to commit suicide (Anderson & Bushman, 2018; Bandura, 1971; Dewall et al., 2011; Fuld et al., 2009; Myers, 2000; Slater, 2015; Stefanone et al., 2010; Yearwood et al., 2019).

According to many historians, humans as a species are the least violent they have ever been (Pinker, 2007). There are potentially hundreds of behavioural reasons for this to be the case, but whichever factors are responsible, history shows a decrease in violence levels, cross-culturally and cross-temporally (Pinker, 2007). Four theories that stood out to Pinker that explain this phenomenon are; evolutionary empathy, state-imposed sanctions for violence against citizens or foreigners, and advantages for both parties when using cooperation, and the possibility that as lifespans extend, either medically or technologically, life's value is increased and therefore violent fantasies remain fantasies (Pinker, 2007). This last possibility seems to fit with a study that found at least 80% of people had fantasised about killing someone else, but obviously, 80% of people have not acted on this impulse (Pinker, 2007). Another historical area to consider is access to media outlets, as this may highlight the extent that modern-day media is responsible for modern-day violence (Cowan, 2012; Pinker, 2007).

According to Cowan, formally institutionalised literacy training was not typical in the 18th century in England or America for the working or middle classes (Cowan, 2012). Newspapers and journals were in print in the early 1700s. Nevertheless, the populous' access to these sources is ambiguous due to literacy capabilities being immeasurable, due to schooling within family businesses, apprenticeships, or similar practical environments rather than formal school settings (Cowan, 2012). This ambiguity makes it extremely difficult to assess the extent that the media influenced violent behaviour. Events such as cat-burning were popular forms of entertainment for the general public in the 16th century (evidenced in France; the scholastic

attitudes and literacy levels of France and England were similar in the early 16th century, and so the assumption would be that appetites for violence were also comparable) (Pinker, 2007). Visual forms of violent media were present in this era to satisfy the populous en masse, and so few conclusions can accurately determine the extent of media influence on violence. However, one correlation is that gratuitous uncensored violence was far more common historically than now, and violence levels are declining globally; although this is simply a relationship and not empirical evidence of causality (Pinker, 2007).

The essay will now conclude with further research and final points. Most of the research cited comes from either western sources or states with privately-owned media. A cross-cultural study exploring the extent of media effects on violent behaviour would be more inclusive of all cultures and increase the validity of the theories developed to become more ecologically valid. Socialist and communist societies with state-owned media outlets may hold significant validation potential. Media violence overwhelmingly increases the violent behaviour of vulnerable individuals consuming it but has little effect on those not as susceptible. Research into the causes of this vulnerability has previously performed, but further study, using the DSMM, into socially diverse youth groups may help provide policy advice to government and media outlets.

The extent of the effects of violent media on violent and aggressive behaviour depends on a combination of personal, social and situational factors, all of which stem from a genetic and environmental combination.

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