

To what extent does media influence aggression.

Nowadays technology is growing at an amazingly fast rate, so is the media. Compared to the 1970's there are so many new ways to consume media, and it is often used to relax. Majority of households gather around to watch a film and just spend some quality time with each other. During covid, many of us were placed on furlough – with an abundance of spare time to relax, watch movies, television shows and play video games. Schools across the world closed for undetermined periods of time, and children stayed at home playing video games and watching movies to pass the time. Concerns over media displaying aggression and violence have been present since the 1950's, however since then media such as YouTube has become easier than ever for children to access with little content warning and monitoring from parents. Media psychologists have theorised if aggressive media can influence children and adults into participating in aggressive behaviour or becoming more violent due to the aggressive content they have been exposed to while considering factors such as the child's personality, interests, and gender, their environment and peer influence.

Media is a term often used to describe mass forms of communication. This can include the radio, newspapers, television and more recently – the internet. With the advance of technology devices such as smartphones, computers and televisions are now standardised items that most households own. In 2019 a study conducted in the UK (United Kingdom) found that 28.8 million households own a television, and 55.5 million people own a smartphone, (Popovic., 2022.) With these statistics, the concern grows surrounding how the public may be influenced by violence and aggression within the media. Exposure to violent and aggressive media has risen by staggering figures since the 1950's leaving many professionals wondering if media exposure can influence violent and aggressive behaviour in viewers. For example, a study found 90 percent of the top grossing movies contained at least one violent male character, this is more than double since the 1950's. And since 1985, 94 percent of top grossing movies contained at least one violent scene. 37 percent of television shows and movies intended for children contain physical or verbal aggression, (Fitzpatrick, 2022). This shows that violent and aggressive movies are incredibly appealing and aggressive characters are appraised for their violence.

Some concerns that continue to arise surrounding media aggression and violence are centred around who may be most at risk, and most would agree that children are most vulnerable when consuming content due to their inability to distinguish between fantasy and reality. In 1984 statutory age censorship of moving pictures came into law in the United Kingdom, allowing parents to assess the age guidance on a film before their child views it with the intention of children only viewing content appropriate for their age. However, with the rise of accessibility in technology many children can view inappropriate content in several ways without any regulation or warning via the internet, social media, and even news reports on subjects like knife crime, (BBFC). Criminal violent behaviour is often glamorised

within the media, for example heroic films are often jam packed with aggression ranging from verbal aggression to psychical violence and ending with 'hero' being rewarded. The characters in hero films are often unrealistic, with superhuman abilities This can cause children to be under the impression that using aggression can resolve real life conflicts and poses a risk of children becoming confused with fiction and reality, (Val, T., 2022) However, there is great conflict of opinion regarding imitation of aggression through media due to factors such as environmental and biological.

In the 1960's psychologist Albert Bandura proposed a theory regarding social learning (or observational learning) and at the time it was controversial to behavioural psychologists who believed that people learned through classical and operational learning only – but has since become known as a breakthrough in psychology. Bandura suggested that unlike any theory prior, people may learn through interaction with others. Bandura then conducted a series of studies, the most famous and well documented being 'The Bobo doll' experiment. the purpose of the study was to examine the influence of observed behaviour (such as aggression). Bandura's study comprised of 36 males, and 36 females aged between 3-6 years old. The children were observed prior to the study and the results determined their preexisting levels of aggression and their groups. The children were exposed to three conditions, aggressive, non-aggressive and no model. The first group of 24 children known as the aggressive condition watched an adult being aggressive to a toy doll with items such as a hammer and being thrown in the air with verbal comments. The second non-aggressive group of 24 children watched an adult calmly playing with other toys and ignoring the doll. The third group of 24 children did not observe any doll/model and is known as the control group (no manipulation).

The children were then individually taken into a room with appealing toys, the child briefly played with the toys and then they were removed to be reserved for other children. This is called "aggression arousal." following this, the children were then given a selection of toys categorised by aggressive such as farm animals and non-aggressive such as wooden mallets and a bobo doll. The results of this session concluded that children exposed to the aggressive condition displayed significantly more aggressive interactions with the bobo doll, and that there was a clear difference in behaviour between male and female participants and that boys were more psychically aggressive. The results supported Bandura's hypothesis in that children were able to learn and imitate observed aggression/behaviour through real life and media via cognitive priming, which is an automatic processor or a 'short-cut' in short-term memory providing us with a mental script of what comes next, with an increased risk of aggressive activity, (Bandura, A. 1977).

Two of the main controversial points when discussing media and violence are usually movies and video games. Although, the two subjects are widely different. For example, in video games such as 'Grand Theft Auto' are progression based via fighting, shooting, stealing cars and large heist jobs and other criminal and aggressive activities. 'GTA V' (Grand theft auto five) is part of a series and this game is the most recent and fifth in the instalment. GTA

producers 'Rockstar games' issued a PEGI warning (Pan-European Game Information) advisory stating the game is only intended for users 18+ with a warning of "extreme violence; multiple, motiveless killing; violence towards defenceless people; and strong language" (askaboutgames.com, 2023). The game itself has two different modes, storyline and online. The storyline mode features three interchangeable and playable characters with very criminal backgrounds, while online mode allows users to interact with other online users. Rockstar Games features a brief overview of the game "When a young street hustler, a retired bank robber, and a terrifying psychopath find themselves entangled with some of the most frightening and deranged elements of the criminal underworld, the U.S. government, and the entertainment industry, they must pull off a series of dangerous heists to survive in a ruthless city in which they can trust nobody — least of all each other." (Rockstar games). With over 160 million copies of GTA V sold, it comes as no surprise that the game has been accessed by many children. With violent and aggressive gameplay and modern graphics GTA V is one of the most realistic video games made, there is a great deal of concern over children interacting with this media and progressing through the game via violence and a struggle to distinguish fantasy from reality, there is a lack of literature surrounding long term exposure and the effect that such games will have on future behaviour.

Following the popular videogame's release in spring 2013 a rise in crime sparked all over the world with several cases being directly inspired the game's content. A fourteen-year-old boy arrested for a double murder in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho in 2014 – just one year after the release of the game, gruesomely attacked his father and brother to death with a series of weapons including two guns, and a variety of knives. The teen confessed his crimes in a 911 phone call and spoke with police later regarding his enjoyment playing the beloved game and found a character of the game particularly appealing. The teen told police that the character 'Trevor' - known for his unpredictability and psychopathic tendencies was "cool ". (Keneally, 2014). Regardless of the statement given by the teen, there is suspicion of abuse and poverty which may have been the primary motivation behind this crime. The mental state of the child is also disputed.

While there could be several cases allegedly influenced by specific media content, it can be difficult to obtain unmistakable evidence that clearly link aggressive behaviour to the content that a person/collective had been exposed to. Another limitation is personal factors, everybody is different. Each person may have already been exposed to aggression and people may just naturally enjoy or be less sensitive towards aggression prior to any studies. Another thing to consider when trying to create a link between content and crime, is the person's background, what type of area they come from, family history and peer influence. If a person has been around aggression and violence during their upbringing, it is unclear if media influence would play a significant part in any future behaviours (Anderson, et. al, 2017).

In 1995 psychologists Weisz and Earls conducted a laboratory-based study to see if there was a correlation between aggressive media in childhood and aggressive behaviour in adulthood. Their findings supported the desensitisation theory proposed by psychologist Dr Joseph Wolpe suggests that systematic desensitisation therapy can be used to treat sufferers of chronic phobia. By repeatedly exposing participants to their phobia within a safe

environment, anxiety levels could reduce significantly therefore treating the phobia, (Wolpe, 1986). The same theory can be applied to graphic aggressive and violent content in both media and real life. When people are repeatedly exposed to content such as gang fights, or knife crime anxiety levels could reduce causing a risk of people becoming too 'relaxed' if these situations occur, or even become more willing to participate in aggressive activities/crimes themselves.

The study comprised of 192 participants, 86 males and 106 females. All participants were shown a scene from one type of film. The categories were: A) Sexual Aggression towards a male. B) sexual aggression towards a female. C) graphic violence. D) Neutral, none of the above. Following the exposure to content, participants were required to complete a 252-item questionnaire with questions relating to impersonal violence, rape myths, aggression, and empathy. After the questionnaire, participants then watched a re-enactment of a real-life rape court trial. Males who viewed movie type B) sexual aggression towards women were exposed to a very graphic rape scene in the 1971 original movie 'Strawdog's' showed an acceptance towards rape myths for example: "It's not rape if it is your wife or girlfriend" and "women who wear revealing clothes are 'asking for it'." (rapecrisis.org.uk). Males also unfortunately displayed signs of less sympathy towards the woman in the mock rape trial and were less likely to give a guilty verdict towards the male defendant. The results showed that the content had little effect on the female participants. There are some limitations to this study, for example longevity of these results is unclear. Research was conducted in a lab-based study therefore leaving room to question if results would remain the same in real-life scenarios.

There are far and few studies that aim to research the effects of media violence exposure from childhood to adulthood. One notable study that aims to predict future aggressive behaviours based off exposure to media aggression is the Huesmann and Eron study which took place over an impressive 15 years from 1977-1992. Huesmann and Eron set out to investigate a positive correlational response between Television interests (aggression) and impact the content would on future behaviours. The study aimed to provide theoretical evidence for the following questions: A) To what extent does early exposure predict young adult violence and aggression? B) Is there a clear difference in gender predictability? C) Is there a difference in which the child's own identification with aggressive characters or failure to distinguish fantasy from reality within the plot effect the outcome? D) To what extent does any long-term relation is due to the child simply liking aggressive and violent television or environmental factors that stimulates violence and aggression in adulthood? Prior to the study, parental consent was given to 758 children to participate (76% of those who were deemed eligible). Data was collected from 557 participants over a period of two years to lay the framework and assess what type of television they liked watching, existing aggression levels etc. Data was analysed again when the children reached third grade (between 8 and 9 years old). To conclude the study, 15 years on when participants were around 20-22 years old, 450 (81%) of the children were traced and contacted to take part in the final element of data collection known as an archival follow-up. To conduct the follow up, participants were asked to attend an interview in person, over the phone or via mail in the form of a survey.

Participants were also required to create a list of individuals who know them best, excluding close relative such as siblings and parents. The individuals listed were contacted and asked to take part in a 1.5-hour interview to give insight on the participant of the study. The results indicated a positive correlation of children who viewed media aggression, had an increase in extreme criminal convictions by 30 years old, (Weiz and Earls, 1995).

To understand the extent of media influence on violence and aggression, more longitudinal studies are needed to assess the long-term effects of aggressive media exposure in children, to predict if there is a risk of the content producing aggression in adulthood. Research shows that males are likely to enjoy violent content than women, and the results of the Huesmann study revealed that after being exposed to a graphic rape scene, males were less likely to deem a male defendant guilty in a mock rape trial. These findings showed researchers that males are more likely to be influenced than females – who showed no meaningful change, and that desensitisation does occur. The Bobo doll experiment revealed that children can learn by demonstration but also that children could learn aggressive behaviour but not necessarily embark on aggressive activities when presented with the Bobo Doll later. While media may influence children, other factors such as gender, the child's upbringing, peer influence, and general interest of aggression determined their level of risk of aggressive and violent media. For future research, psychologists could look at the same group of children in adolescent and monitor behavioural changes as new forms of media are introduced to them. This will allow a clearer understanding on what to expect, as media is still expanding.

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