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Revisiting Media Violence: A Critical Analysis of Effect Studies and Emerging Concerns

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Introduction

The exposure of both children and adults to violent media content has remained one of the most extensively debated and researched areas within media and communication studies. Since the inception of mass communication as an academic field, a significant portion of research has focused on media effects—how different forms of media influence attitudes, behaviors, and societal norms. From early studies on textual media, such as books, to contemporary analyses of visual and interactive media like television, films, and video games, the central concern has often revolved around media's potential to trigger or reinforce aggressive behavior.

One of the most controversial and provocative discussions in this domain concerns the parallels drawn between media violence and real-life aggression. For instance, Bushman, Das, and Key (2007) sparked debate by pointing out that even religious texts like the Bible, when containing violent passages, may evoke aggressive responses in readers, much like violent television programs or video games. This comparison challenges traditional boundaries of media effects research and raises questions about the broader social and psychological impacts of violent narratives across different media forms.

The academic discourse on media violence, however, has always been polarized. On one hand, scholars like Bushman and Anderson (2003) assert that the correlation between violent media consumption and aggression is as established as the link between smoking and lung cancer. They argue that the evidence supporting media effects is robust, consistent, and conclusive. On the other hand, critics like Freedman and Savage (2004) caution against oversimplified cause-and-effect assumptions. They contend that many effect studies neglect to account for alternative explanations for aggression, such as social, psychological, or environmental factors. According to this perspective, methodological flaws and the lack of contextual analysis often led to exaggerated claims about media's role in fostering violence.



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Given this lack of unanimity in research findings, it becomes imperative to critically examine how scholars have approached the study of media violence and how they have conceptualized and measured constructs such as aggression. Understanding these methodological and theoretical variations is essential for advancing the conversation beyond binary conclusions.

The debate on media violence and aggression witnessed a renewed surge after the Virginia Tech shooting in 2007. This tragic event reignited public and scholarly concerns about the role of violent media in influencing extreme behaviors. In its aftermath, there was a revival of effect studies seeking to determine whether, and to what extent, media content contributes to real-world violence.

In recent years, the discussion on media violence has become even more complex due to emerging technologies and changing media consumption patterns. The rise of social media platforms has introduced new forms of violence exposure, such as cyberbullying, hate speech, algorithmic amplification of violent content, and live-streamed acts of violence. Events like the Christchurch Mosque shooting in 2019, where the perpetrator live-streamed the attack on social media, have raised urgent questions about digital media's role in normalizing, promoting, or even broadcasting real-time violence. Similarly, the rapid growth of virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technologies introduces new ethical and psychological concerns regarding immersive violent content, which may blur the boundaries between virtual experiences and real-world emotions.

Additionally, violent content in memes, viral videos, and short-form content on platforms like TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts presents challenges that traditional media violence studies did not anticipate. These new formats are not only more accessible but are also often consumed passively and repeatedly, making their impact harder to measure with conventional methodologies.

The debate on media violence also saw a revival after the Virginia Tech shooting in 2007, which reignited public and scholarly concerns about violent media's role in influencing extreme behaviors. Since then, school shootings, mass violence, and radicalization through online content have become focal points of renewed effect studies.

There is a critical need to revisit and update the analysis of media violence studies. It is essential to investigate how scholars have conceptualized, measured, and studied the construct of "violence" across different media landscapes, both traditional and digital. A critical analysis of media violence effect studies must not only evaluate the existing research corpus but also interrogate the frameworks and assumptions that guide these studies. This approach is vital for understanding the evolving nature of media violence in contemporary society, where digital media, AI-driven content



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algorithms, and participatory culture continuously reshape how violence is produced, consumed, and interpreted.

There is a pressing need to undertake critical analysis of media violence effect studies. Such an analysis should not only evaluate the existing body of research but also interrogate the assumptions, methodologies, and frameworks that have shaped the field. By doing so, scholars can better understand how violence is constructed, operationalized, and measured within effect studies, and identify the gaps or biases that may have influenced previous findings. This reflective approach is essential for building a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the media-violence nexus in contemporary society.

Objectives:

The objective of the proposed study is to address the following questions of inquiry-

- To critically analyze the trajectory and methodologies of media effect studies on violence, with a focus on both traditional and emerging media forms.
- To examine how the concept of violence is constructed, operationalized, and measured in media studies across different platforms, including textual, visual, interactive, and digital media.
- To investigate the renewed scholarly and societal interest in media violence effect studies, particularly in the context of contemporary issues such as live-streamed violence, social media amplification, virtual reality, and algorithm-driven content exposure.

Methodology:

The present study employs a qualitative, secondary research approach, focusing exclusively on an extensive review of existing literature related to media violence and media effects studies. Given the complex, longstanding, and evolving debates around the influence of media violence on human behavior, especially aggression and social conduct, this study does not involve primary data collection through surveys, interviews, experiments, or field observations. Instead, it systematically analyzes scholarly literature to draw critical insights, synthesize existing findings, and highlight areas for further academic inquiry.

Nature and Scope of the Study

This research is designed as a conceptual and analytical literature review, aimed at:



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- Tracing the historical evolution of media violence studies.
- Examining theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches employed by scholars.
- Analyzing how the constructions of violence, aggression, and media effects have been defined, operationalized, and measured across studies.
- Identifying points of scholarly consensus, as well as areas of contention and unresolved debate.

By critically engaging with literature, the study seeks to problematize existing narratives in media violence research, explore under-researched areas, and contribute to the growth of academic knowledge in the field.

Literature Review

Evolution of Effect studies

The issues regarding the social effect of the media were present as far back as 1920's when most of the critics accused that motion pictures had quite negative effects on children. The Motion Picture Research Council, supported by the Payne Fund, a private foundation, sponsored a series of 13 studies in 1928 on the effects of movies on children. Following content analysis of movies, gain of information, attitude change, and effects on behavior, the conclusion is that the films were powerful sources of information, attitudes, and behavior for children. Another medium, the comic book, was blamed in the early 1950s for its purported ill effects (Wertham, 1954).

Joseph Klapper in 1960 recapitulated what had been learned up to then about the social effects of mass communication. Compared to most researchers, Klapper minimized the negative impact of the media. He concluded that the media most frequently reinforced a person's own attitudes and inclinations. Klapper's perspective, which came to be called the minimal effects position (Klapper 1960), helped shape a theory of media effects. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, attention regarding the antisocial effect of the media moved from radio to television. College campus experiments by Bandura and Berkowitz (abstracted in Comstock & Paik, 1991) indicated that aggressive behavior could be acquired through exposure to violent media content and that a stimulation rather than a catharsis effect was more likely. In 1970, a lot of research on the social impact of the mass media was conducted following the issuance of the Eisenhower commission report in which there was a recommendation that There is convergence of quite substantial evidence on short-run causation of child aggression by exposure to violence. and the considerably less secure evidence of field



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studies that. Violent exposure occurs prior to some long-run form of aggressive behavior. This overlap represents some initial evidence of a causal relationship (Scientific advisory committee on Television and social behavior 1972). Around the same period, three television networks were funding research on the subject where CBS conducted two studies, a field work experiment that identified no correlation between watching TV and imitation of anti-social behavior (Milgram and Shotland 1973) and a longitudinal study in Britain that identified a relationship between watching violence on TV and engaging in anti-social behavior (Belson 1978). ABC then did research that came to the conclusion that television stimulated aggression in the children to only a small extent (Heller and Polsky 1978). The findings of NBC study employing state of the art statistical studies reported non-significant relationship between viewing television violence at the beginning of the study and then reexamination of the same data by others determined that there is some relationship between viewing violence and aggression at least among one demographic sub group middle class girls ((Cook, Kendzierski, & Thomas, 1983)). During the years 1985 to 2001 there were some controversies, but the subject was still a vital research study in the academic field.

William (1986) performed complex field experiments in three Canadian towns and concluded that with other two municipalities that municipality which received the TV recently had more scores in physical and verbal aggression (William 1986). There was a sequence of studies carried out by the group of international researchers (Huesman and Eron 1986). The sample data was taken from USA, Israel, Finland and Poland. Both Polish and American data came with the inference that early exposure to TV results in aggression. The study in Finland resulted in the correlation only among boys and no correlation was seen in case of girls.

TV watching leads to aggression in urban children and not in the rural children, as it was discovered in the Israel study. The relationship between television watching and violence was weak in all these nations. The congress voted for the telecommunication act of 1996 by which the television sets were required to have V chips that enable the parents to lock the violent programs from children. A study by the Kaiser family foundation discovered that there were only 17% of families utilizing V chips to filter the programmes. Colorado High School violence and similar incidents revived interest in media effect research on violence. The surgeon general report Youth violence had concluded that family influences were a less risk factor for media violence than peer groups, socio economic status and drug substance use (US dept. of Health and Human services, 2001).

The growing popularity of video games in initial years of the decade created other research avenues in this area. Early findings in this area (Silverman and Williamson 1987) discovered the impacts of



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violent video games resulting in aggression among the children. The studies through meta-analysis have also come up with varying conclusions. (Anderson and Bushman 2001) and (Anderson 2004) discovered small but highly significant relationship between violent video games and aggression while (Sherry 2001) concluded that there is no correlation between violent video games and aggression. The publication biases the journals' tendency to publish just those studies with significant effects was present in that meta-analysis which detected a strong association and if publication bias is adjusted there will be no correlation (Ferguson 2007). Interest in research of the pro social impact of media dipped during the 1980's and stayed low until 2000. A correlational study only accounted for 1% of the variance in a measure of pro social behavior demonstrated at the schools.

Theoretical developments Different approaches have been used in effect studies on violence.

1. **Catharsis approach:** According to this method, watching violent television purges a viewer of their aggressive tendencies, which in turn reduces aggression. There is a negative correlation between media violence viewing and aggressive conduct; the more violent content one consumes, the less aggressive they will be. Feshbach (1955, 1972), who thought that having aggressive fantasies helped lessen aggressive drives, promoted the notion that violent media content could be both cathartic and healthy. Stimulation theory: This theory is the opposite of the catharsis theory and prompts that viewing violence leads to more aggression on part of the viewer. The overwhelming studies found evidence of stimulation theory.

Social learning theories: According to Bandura (1986), social learning theory is the most well-known cognitive theory that explains how exposure to violent media content results in aggressive behavior. It illustrates how people can learn by watching others as well as by firsthand experience. This theory has several important components, including motivation, attention, retention, and reproduction. Both the event's characteristics and the observer's characteristics affect attention to an event. The ability of a person to recall observed behavior is known as retention. The reinforcement and punishment that accompany the performance of the observed behavior constitute the theory's motivational component. When viewers believe that the content is more realistic, social learning theory is strengthened (Potter 1988). According to the social learning theory, watching television shows can teach people both pro- and antisocial behaviors. The model also claims that witnessing repeated antisocial behavior encourages people to engage in similar behavior in real life. Key findings from laboratory and field experiments by Bandura (1977) indicate that children commit new acts of aggression following a single exposure to them in movies or television. According to the arousal hypothesis (Tannenbaum & Zillmann, 1975), higher arousal might be required for a portrayal to have a discernible impact. This model states that an angry person will become more aggressive if they are exposed to an arousing stimulus, like a pornographic movie, and are put in a situation where they could react aggressively.



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Priming: Based on the ideas of cognitive neoassociationism, priming effects analysis suggests that at certain aspects of memory, emotion, or thought are components of a network linked by associative pathways (Berkowitz and Rogers 1986).

The ideas brought on by seeing violent media increase the likelihood that related aggressive thoughts will surface by triggering other semantically related thoughts.

According to Berkowitz and Rogers, priming analysis can help explain why prolonged exposure to violent media has temporary, short-term effects.

To reduce the likelihood of further violent effects, they point out that the priming effect gradually diminishes. Van Evra (1990) says that "script theory" might also help explain how watching violent TV affects people. Most people, especially younger ones, don't have a lot of real-life experience with violence, but they see a lot of it on TV. This could change the way they act or their scripts. People who watch a lot of violent TV might remember these scripts and act out when something triggers them to do so. Moreover, Huesmann and Eron (1986) argue that if a young child learns early in his or her developmental cycle that aggression is a potent problem-solving technique; that behavior will be hard to change because the script has been well rehearsed by the child.

A study by Krcmar (1998) that used the dynamic transaction model found that the way families talk to each other affects how children see violence. In 2007, Comstock argued for a sociological theory and said that research on TV violence should move beyond looking at individuals to looking at how they affect social groups. Comstock found five social groups that are more likely to be aggressive: those who have a history of aggression, those who have bad parenting, those who have bad social relationships, those who have low mental health, and those who act out.

2. Methods used by researchers to study media effects of violence:

Experimental method: In experimental method to study the anti-social impact of the media violence was done by showing one group the violent content and the other controlled group sees the nonviolent content. The dependent variable aggression is immediately measured after exposure either by a pencil and a paper test or by a mechanical device. (Lieberman and Baron 1972) divided children into two groups. One group was shown a violent clip of 3.5 minutes, and the other was shown athletic sports clip. All children were taken to the separate rooms and told and given a apparatus by saying that in the other room other child is playing the game. The apparatus had Hit and Hurt button. It had told them to press either button. It was concluded that the children who had watched the violent programmes were more likely to press the hurt button than the children under control groups.

Survey method: Most studies have used questionnaires to look at media. The demographic and sociographic variables have been used in a lot of recent studies. Mcleod, Atkin, and Chaf (1972) show the survey method, which mostly used questionnaires to measure things like violence viewing, aggression, and family environment. They gave a list of 65 prime-time shows and a scale to show how many people watched each one. We got an index of overall violence viewing by rating the violence level of each show on its own and then multiplying



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that by how often people watched it. Seven scales were used to measure aggression, and the family environment was measured by asking about how much control parents had over the TV and how much they stressed non-violent punishment.

Panel studies: The researchers have even tried to do panel studies on effect of violence. There was no unanimity in the panel studies as done by the researches. Lefkowitz, Eron, Waldner, and Huesmann (1972), using a catch-up panel design, reinterviewed 427 of 875 youthful subjects 10 years after they had participated in a study of mental health. . The data were subjected to cross-lagged correlations and path analysis. The results supported the hypothesis that aggression in later life was caused in part by television viewing during early years. However, the panel study by Milavsky and colleagues (1983), sponsored by NBC, found no evidence of a relationship.

Meta analysis: A quantitative synthesis of many research findings and their interpretations. Paik and Comstock (1994) conducted a meta-analysis on 217 studies conducted between 1959 and 1990 that tested 1,142 hypotheses. They found that the impact of media violence exposures varied greatly based on research method. Experiments showed the strongest effects and time-series studies the weakest effects. Nonetheless, there was a highly significant positive association between media representations of violence and antisocial behavior overall. In addition, it was found that males were affected marginally more by media violence exposures than females, and that the largest magnitude of effects were seen for violent cartoons and fantasy programs.

Key Findings and Argument

The lack of strong relationship between the two variables media and violence and the absence of the definition of the pro social content discouraged researchers to study the effects and that's why there were very few scholarly researches on the effect studies from 1980's to 2000. Also the effect model is not grounded in theory. The basic question that why media should imitate audience to follow its content has not been tackled in any theory. The lack of grounded theory has led to the assumption that its media rather than people who are the unproblematic starting point of research in media. Also, the theoretical developments in effect studies have tackled social problems backward. The violence in the society had to be studied with reference to those who engage in it and not the media. The criminologists try to study the crime and violence going for explanations not media but to the social factors like unemployment, poverty etc.

- Media violence studies remain methodologically diverse but inconclusive, with ongoing debates about causality, correlation, and the interpretation of results.
- The globalization of media content, driven by entertainment conglomerates, has normalized violence as a translatable and culturally neutral narrative device, making it a dominant feature in global media products.



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- The role of new media technologies, including social media algorithms, virtual reality, and live streaming, has complicated the media violence debate. These platforms create interactive and immersive environments where violent content is often sensationalized and repeatedly consumed.
- The revival of media effects research after mass shootings and violent events highlights the cyclical nature of this academic and public concern. However, reactionary studies often risk simplifying complex social phenomena into media-based explanations alone.
- Children are especially vulnerable to media influences, as their formative years are increasingly mediated by screen-based narratives rather than family, school, or community interactions. This raises concerns about the long-term psychological and social implications of growing up in a media-saturated environment where violence is a common theme.

Reason for lack of unanimity among scholars:

Experiments and surveys have been the most popular research strategies used to study the impact of media on antisocial and prosocial behavior. The studies on effect are usually based on artificial settings or even in classrooms where instead of showing the complete television channels the respondents are shown selected clip that lacks the narrative meaning of everyday TV production. They are then given in animate objects like Bandura famous Bobo doll or a questionnaire to fill it. The studies also rely on that subjects will not alter the behavior when they are under scanner. (Borden 1975) has demonstrated that presence of the researcher can radically affect the children behavior. The same has happened with the survey research where in some researches have taken variables like violence viewing, aggression and family environment (McLeod, Atkin, and Chaffee (1972) whereas the researchers using the survey method found that when the influence of the child's gender, the parents' educational level, and the child's academic level were statistically controlled, exposure to prosocial television explained only 1% of the variance in prosocial behaviors (Sprafkin and Rubinstein 1979). The results of the research done by different scholars were dissimilar because the effect studies were based on studies with misapplied methodologies.

Conclusion

The present study set out to critically analyze the body of media effects research on violence, examine how media violence is studied, and investigate the factors behind the periodic resurgence of scholarly attention to this issue—particularly in response to tragic real-world events. Drawing from an extensive review of secondary literature, it becomes clear that the relationship between



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media violence and aggressive behavior remains one of the most contentious and inconclusive debates in communication and media studies.

A key concern, especially in the context of children, is the pervasive influence of media narratives in shaping perceptions of the world. Unlike previous generations, today's children are increasingly socialized by media conglomerates that operate across global markets. The stories they encounter—primarily through television, video games, and online platforms—are not necessarily reflective of local culture, family values, or educational teachings but are often filtered through the lens of corporate entertainment industries. Violence, due to its universal appeal and lack of language barriers, becomes a convenient and profitable storytelling element. This global commodification of violence raises ethical and psychological questions about its long-term impact on young, impressionable minds.

Despite decades of research, there is no unanimous conclusion on whether media violence directly causes real-world aggression. Some scholars liken the correlation between media violence and aggression to the well-established link between smoking and lung cancer (Bushman & Anderson, 2003), while others argue that the field is riddled with methodological inconsistencies, cultural biases, and a failure to account for alternative variables (Freedman & Savage, 2004). The problem is further complicated by the shifting media landscape, where violent content is no longer confined to television or films but is now embedded in video games, virtual reality, live-streamed events, and viral social media content.

The resurgence of effect studies on media violence, especially after events like the Virginia Tech shooting (2007) and the Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre (2012), reflects a pattern where real-life tragedies often reignite public and academic debates about media responsibility. In the case of Sandy Hook, President Barack Obama's executive orders to investigate the role of violent media content underscored the seriousness with which this issue is approached at the policy level. However, such reactions often overlook the multifaceted nature of violence, which is influenced by socio-economic, psychological, cultural, and environmental factors—not media exposure alone.

Recommendations for Future Research

Given the findings, it is evident that future research must:

- Move beyond traditional media violence paradigms and incorporate new media ecologies, including social media, gaming, VR, and AI-driven content curation.



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- Interdisciplinary approaches combining psychology, sociology, cultural studies, and media studies are needed to understand the complex causes of aggression and violent behavior.
- Scholars should critically examine the political and economic interests that drive the global proliferation of violent content and question whether the commodification of violence is an unavoidable byproduct of the global media marketplace.
- More emphasis should be placed on longitudinal and contextual studies that account for cultural, social, and individual differences, rather than relying solely on laboratory experiments or isolated case studies.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while the question of whether media violence leads to real-world aggression remains unsettled, the broader issue lies in how media shapes our collective imagination, social norms, and emotional responses. Media violence is not just about scenes of bloodshed or combat—it is about the cultural narratives that normalize violence as entertainment and embed it within everyday media consumption. Recognizing this complexity is essential if we are to develop meaningful academic, policy, and societal responses to this ongoing issue.

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