EFFECTS OF VIOLENT MEDIA ON CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I start by reviewing theoretical frameworks that have been used to predict and explain media effects in general, and theoretical explanations for how media violence might impact on aggressive behaviour, and then effects of violence in the media, with a particular emphasis on its effects on children; this is the aspect of media effects which has also raised the greatest fears about detrimental long-term consequences. And I also focus on children; here review evidence of the effects of advertising on children's values, attitudes and behaviour, another commonly raised area of concern.

KEYWORDS: *Television, Media, Children, Commercial Advertising, Media Violence, Education And Entertainment.*

INTRODUCTION

Virtually since the dawn of television, parents, teachers, legislators and mental health professionals have wanted to understand the impact of media, particularly on children. Of special concern has been the portrayal of violence, particularly given psychologist Albert Bandura's work in the 1970s on social learning and the tendency of children to imitate what they see. As a result of 15 years of consistently disturbing findings about the violent content of children's programs, the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior was formed in 1969 to assess the impact of violence on the attitudes, values and behavior of viewers. The resulting report and a follow-up report in 1982 by the National Institute of Mental Health identified these major effects of seeing violence on television:

- Children may become less sensitive to the pain and suffering of others.
- Children may be more fearful of the world around them.
- Children may be more likely to behave in aggressive or harmful ways toward others.

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Research by psychologists L. Rowell Huesmann, Leonard Eron and others starting in the 1980s found that children who watched many hours of violence on television when they were in elementary school tended to show higher levels of aggressive behavior when they became teenagers. By observing these participants into adulthood, Huesmann and Eron found that the ones who had watched a lot of TV violence when they were 8 years old were more likely to be arrested and prosecuted for criminal acts as adults. Interestingly, being aggressive as a child did not predict watching more violent TV as a teenager, suggesting that TV watching could be a cause rather than a consequence of aggressive behavior. However, later research by psychologists Douglas Gentile and Brad Bushman, among others, suggested that exposure to media violence is just one of several factors that can contribute to aggressive behavior.

Whether exposure of children or adults to violent media is a cause of aggression and violent behavior has been one of the most intensely debated issues in

criminal justice and the broader populace. The 20th century has seen many other examples, from Harry Potter teaching witchcraft, to the concern that playing Dungeons and Dragons would lead to Satanism or mental illness, to the Hays Code "taming" of Betty Boop (which, by forcing her to put on more clothes, doomed the comic strip). Concerns have come and gone that media such as comic books, jazz, rock, rap, role-playing games, and books, as well as television and movies, would lead to waves of rebelliousness, violence, and moral degradation. New media such as video games and the Internet inevitably stoke the flames of fear with waves of advocates and politicians expressing concern over the fate of supposedly vulnerable children and teens. Opinions on the matter of media violence effects are wide ranging. Some scholars claim that media violence effects have been conclusively demonstrated, so much so that they certainly equal that of smoking and lung cancer (Bushman & Anderson, 2001).

The role of media in modern life is indispensable, providing information, education and entertainment. It is not our intention to review the nature or extent of these positive influences. Rather, the focus of this paper is on potential negative impacts. Debate has raged about the nature and the extent of the negative impact of some aspects of the media on individuals' values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviours, and on society in general. Further, there is increasing concern over the role of the media in affecting the course of public events, such as international disputes and criminal court cases. At the same time, debate reflects the ongoing struggle to find the appropriate balance between control of media and rights to freedom of expression and of choice.

Despite the wealth of psychological and other research on various facets of media effects, no single clear picture has yet emerged about how and when the media does impact on the individual or society. Nevertheless, in view of the continuing debate about appropriate responses to the 'media problem', it appears timely to review the psychological research literature with a view to providing research-based recommendations to the various parties involved. These parties include consumers, educators, regulatory bodies, producers and broadcasters. There are also implications of the existing research for psychological research and practice.

In understanding the potential effects of commercial advertising on children, special concerns arise because of cognitive developmental issues that affect message comprehension. For instance, young children up to kindergarten age are likely to have little or no appreciation of the self-serving and selling intent of product commercials. Accordingly, it has been suggested that a significant part of the apprehension about the effects of 'harmful' media content such as violence and commercial advertising results from beliefs about media influence on others (Lasorsa, 1992; Rojas, Shah, & Faber, 1996). In forming policy, this needs to be recognized. An emphasis must be put on measuring and reporting actual media effects and not perceived media effects, and on considering the implications of 'third-person' perceptions on calls for media censorship to protect others as well as for personal media use.

Violent videogames:-

Newer forms of media, including those involving videogames and the Internet, give the child an increasingly active role. Many of these have violence as a central theme, and the child often needs to perform violent acts to achieve the end goal of the game (e.g., use a handheld electronic 'gun' to 'kill' characters on the screen). Since the child is actively encouraged to identify with the aggressive 'hero', and to rehearse aggressive acts, and is rewarded for doing so, it seems likely the processes identified in social learning theory and in models involving 'priming' and 'scripts' (such as GLM) will be even more salient. Indeed, research has documented that play with violent videogames does result in higher levels of aggressive behaviour (Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Irwin & Gross, 1995), physiological arousal (Segal & Dietz, 1991), aggressive mood (Fleming & Rickwood, 1999), desensitisation (Bushman & Anderson, 2009) and changes in self-perception (Bastian, Jetten, & Radke, 2012). It has been argued that engagement with violent video games may have more detrimental effects compared to other media that require less personal engagement (Anderson, Gentile, & Buckley, 2007; Polman, Orobio de Castro, & Van Aken, 2008).

RECOMMENDATIONS
What should policymakers and broadcasters do?

Broadcasting standards establishing limits on violent depictions during hour's children are likely to watch television. Standards would also control the degree to which violence is depicted so as to be perceived by children as a normal and acceptable response to problems, as equated with power, as leading to reward or glorification of the perpetrator. An additional strategy would be to develop a parental guidance rating system for network and cable television, videotapes, and computer games similar to that established for movies. The re-establishment of industry standards to limit children's exposure to violence. The self regulating code of the National

Association of Broadcasters (1980) was a responsible position of the television industry toward young children. As an immediate action, laws prohibiting the adoption of such voluntary standards as violations of anti-trust regulation should be repealed. *Industry* standards should also limit advertising during children's programming in recognition of children's inability to distinguish the advertising from programming content and to prevent acts of aggression or violence being separated from consequences by intervening commercials.   S t u d i e s show that children up to eight years of age are less likely to "learn the lesson" of a program when ads intervene between an anti-social act and its consequences. Finally, broadcasting standards should prohibit product based programming and feature-length programs whose primary purpose is to sell toys, especially when those toys facilitate imitation of violent or aggressive acts seen on television. Children are unable to evaluate the quality and play value of such products depicted on television. Program based advertising creates in children an insatiable desire for these single-use toys; children start to believe that they can't play without the specific props seen on television.

What can Teachers do?

Early childhood teachers have a responsibility to assist children in developing skills in nonviolent conflict resolution, to assist children to become critical viewers of all forms of media, and to encourage the constructive use of the media for instilling positive social values. Teachers need to be aware of what is currently being broadcast to children and to inform parents of the impact of violent media on children's development.

Teachers can work with children when themes of television violence appear in their play to facilitate more appropriate problem solving and/or creative, imaginative play. Teachers should inform parents when negative or violent themes appear as a regular part of their children's play and support parents in their efforts to monitor children's viewing habits. As professionals, early childhood educators should share their knowledge of child development and the effects of violent media viewing with legislators and sponsors of children's programming. It is the professional responsibility of early childhood educators to advocate for more developmentally and educationally appropriate programming for children. Teachers need to recognize that media are also a powerful teacher that can and should be used constructively with children. Contrary to popular belief, television viewing is not a passive activity; children are mentally active during television viewing. The use of media as an educational tool should not be rejected because much of commercial television currently lacks educational value or promotes violence. Instead, early childhood professionals should advocate for policy that eliminates violence and improves the educational value of media, and should use media constructively in their work with children.

What can parents do?

The absence of government regulation of children's television has made parents' job more difficult, necessitating more parental monitoring of what children see on television.

This unfortunate situation places additional, unnecessary pressure on parents. Parents can watch television and other media with their children and evaluate the shows together. Children do not interpret programs the same way adults do. Adults need to talk with children about what they observe through the media, to find out how children are interpreting what they see and to help clarify misinterpretations. As consumers, parents should recognize and use their influence with sponsors of children's programs. The primary purpose of commercial television is not to entertain or to educate but to sell products. Parents can communicate with advertisers on programs that are valuable, as well as sponsors of programs that are violent. As taxpayers, parents can encourage their legislators to adopt policies to protect children from media violence.

CONCLUSION

Television advertising is a significant influence in children's lives and has been shown to influence their attitudes and consumption behaviour. While young children may be especially vulnerable because they have difficulty discriminating advertising and program content and do not understand advertising's persuasive intent, the more discriminating and critical attitude of older children does not necessarily protect them from the persuasive influence of advertising any more than it does adults.

The prevalence of violence in Indian society is a complex social problem that will not be easily solved. Violence in the media is only one manifestation of the larger society's fascination with violence. However, media violence is not just a reflection of violent society, it is also a contributor. If our nation wishes to produce future generations of productive adults who reject violence as a means of problem solving, we must reassert the vital role of government in protecting its most vulnerable citizens and, together, work to make media part of the solution.

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