A BRIEF REVIEW ON THE EFFECTS OF VIOLENT MEDIA ON YOUTHS

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ABSTRACT

The main aim of this paper is to briefly review the existing body of knowledge related to youth violence and media. In this context, empirical evidences regarding the association between youth violence and media are mentioned. Also, prevalence rates related to youth media usage, risk factors, and individual differences are given in the review. Then, some preventive suggestions based on the empirical findings are proposed to reduce the positive association between youth violence and media exposure. Finally, this brief review would be a useful starting point for further studies aiming to extend existing literature regarding youth violence and media exposure.

Keywords: youth, violence, media

ŞİDDET İÇERİKLİ MEDYANIN GENÇLER ÜZERİNDEKİ ETKİLERİNE İLİŞKİN KISA BİR DERLEME

ÖZET

Bu derlemenin ana amacı, gençlik şiddeti ve medya ile ilgili mevcut bilgiyi kısaca gözden geçirmektir. Bu bağlamda, gençlik şiddeti ile medya arasındaki ilişkiyle ilgili görgül verilerden bahsedilmiştir. Ayrıca gençlerin medya kullanımına ilişkin yaygınlık oranları, risk faktörleri ve bireysel farklılıklar ile ilgili bulgular da bu derlemede verilmiştir. Ardından, gençlik şiddeti ile medyaya maruz kalma arasındaki pozitif ilişkiyi azaltmak için görgül bulgulara dayanan bazı önerilere değinilmiştir. Son olarak, bu kısa derleme, gençlik şiddeti ve medyaya maruz kalma ile ilgili mevcut alanyazını genişletmeyi amaçlayan çalışmalar için yararlı bir başlangıç noktası olacaktır.

Anahtar kelimeler: gençlik, şiddet, medya

INTRODUCTION

The influence of television, since its invention, has already been huge on the life of mankind. In addition, with the emergence of the computer and the Internet, and the fact that the smartphones that we carry in our pockets are quite accessible through lower prices, media exposure has become inevitable in the current world. In the past, the number of televisions were more than telephones (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2001) but now, that kind of comparison would not be possible even if there are multiple televisions in homes. Supporting this statement, 97% of youth aged 12 to 18 years old were found to be users of

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online communication (University of California Internet Report, 2003). Furthermore, 90% of adolescents were regular users of the Internet and 70% of them had at least one profile on social media web sites (Subrahmanyam, Garcia, & Harsono, 2009). Thus, almost all young individuals have online access without any boundaries on time and place (University of Southern California Report, 2004). Such online access without any boundaries may breed unfortunate consequences for youths such as increased tendency to show aggressive behaviors or violent acts after exposure of violence in media. In this context, main aim of this brief review is to mention about media exposure and youth violence.

Media Exposure and Youth Violence

With portable smart devices and easy access to the Internet, today's youth are members of a generation that can play games, watch videos, and keep up with the news—wherever they are. Today's youth spend most of their time on TVs, mobile phones, or computers (e.g., Kılıç, 2014; Kılıç, 2017). On one hand, we talk about a generation that has been under the influence of violent media in the way that they watch the horror movies and try to kill or destroy enemy characters in video games. On the other hand, social media has become a vehicle which can be used to show violence against not only peers through cyber-bullying, harassment, and dating aggression, but also to youths themselves such as self-harm and cyber-suicide (Cash, Thelwall, Peck, Ferrell, & Bridge, 2013; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Ruder, Hatch, Ampanozi, Thali, & Fischer, 2011). Perhaps the question that needs to be asked is whether we should really be concerned or not. To answer that question, I briefly presented findings from empirical investigations regarding the predictor role of violent media exposure on an individual's tendency towards violence.

According to Anderson et al. (2003), violence is defined as physical attacks that breed the most extreme and serious injuries. It may be possible to explain the effect of violent media content on violent behavior in terms of social learning theory. According to this theory, human behavior occurs in relation to the behaviors previously observed in one's environment, and this observation may lead to development of the individual's standards and cognitive attitudes regarding the behavior beyond a simple imitation. Moreover, these observations constitute the cognitive processes of normative beliefs and attitudes about behavior, having seen that the behavior is rewarded or punished (Bandura, 1989). For example, the attitudes of individuals who, in particular, experience violent behavior or task-rewarding returns in video games, may be inconsistent with their attitudes towards violent behavior in real life. In this context, if the content of the violent media that the individual is exposed to is contrary to their standards of conduct, or if such violent behavior is somehow rewarded in the media environment, it is likely that the individual's behavior would change as a result (Berkowitz & Powers, 1979; Geen & Stonner, 1973).

The scope of youth violence can include homicide, aggressive behavior such as physical fights, sexual and physical assault, and bullying (Dahlberg, 1998). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2009) reported that homicide was the second reason for the death of youths and many youths were victims of fatal or non-fatal violence. The percentage of youth who were arrested due to violent crime totals 15% in the US in 2003 (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). However, in America and many other nations, violent crime has reached the lowest level not only in youths, but also in adults in the last 10 years (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2006; van Dijk, van Kesteren, & Smit, 2007). The arrests of young people for serious crimes have been consistently declining since the early 1990s (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2006). Even though official records introduce such a reduction, youth violence remains a crucial issue since it may breed negative consequences on both the perpetrator and the victim such as negative perceptions about school (Nansel et al., 2001), behavioral problems (Haynie et al., 2001), and school non-achievement (DeVoe, Dean, Traube & McKay, 2005). Therefore,

youth violence is an unfortunate issue which could negatively influence individuals, families, and society (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2007).

Studies conducted with both children (Irwin & Gross, 1995) and adolescents (Bartholow & Anderson, 2002) showed that participants who played violent video games were more likely to show violent behavior compared to others who played non-violent video games.

In addition to examining behavioral/physical violence tendencies, some researchers have examined whether violent video games trigger violent thoughts and emotions. Consistently, it was found that participants, who were exposed to violent situations, had increased tendencies to possess aggressive feelings and thoughts (Anderson & Dill, 2000; Kirsh, 1998).

In addition to violent video games, there are studies investigating the relationship between TV and violent tendencies. With the emergence of television, studies have been conducted on violence tendencies in America, Canada, and South Africa through longitudinal designs (Centerwall, 1992). In these studies, crime rates were compared before and after the invention of television. Findings presented that the emergence of television and the combination of increasingly violent broadcasting have increased the level of interpersonal violence in society. Earlier research conducted by Williams (1986) had reported consistent findings regarding increases in aggressive behavior of children parallel to the emergence of TV. Without a doubt, these kinds of findings need to be considered with caution since there may be other confounding factors, however, it is a useful finding for the development of new research questions in the context of TV and violence. Violent tendencies have also been particularly examined in the context of the possible influence from television news. Much of the research included field studies that focused on before and after news or violent incidents well known by the general public. Furthermore, studies confirmed similar findings in the context of the increase in suicidal tendencies after news regarding the suicide of well-known people in society (Philips, 1982; Stack, 1989). Similarly, Berkowitz and Macaulay (1971) found that there was an increase in violent crimes which was the result of an increase in high profile murders (e.g., assassination of John Kennedy) explicitly reflected in the news.

Studies focusing on aggression and violence have suggested that there are many crucial factors related to individual, family, school, peer, and community (Huesmann, 1998). In fact, media exposure is not a single but significant contributing factor in terms of aggression and violent tendencies (American Academy of Pediatrics, 1995). For example, Anderson et al. (2003) indicated the reality that violence in media increases aggression and here, the important point to consider is the extent that media influences people. Furthermore, Ybarra et al. (2008) conducted a study (N= 1,588 youths from 10 to 15 years old) to examine the relationship between exposure to violence in media and violent behavior. Violent behavior such as shooting, stabbing, robbery, and sexual assault were found to be related to violent media exposure. Besides, previous longitudinal studies reported causality between violent media exposure and aggressive behavior (Bushman & Huesmann, 2006; Huesmann, Moise-Titus, Podolski, & Eron, 2003). However, cross-sectional studies have bred the question of whether there is a bidirectional association between media exposure and aggressive behavior. Thus, it is not that clear whether youths are more likely to show aggressive behavior as a result of media exposure, or youths who show aggressive behavior have more of a tendency to seek violent media content.

One study that included random sample of 4,441 youth (10-18 years old) suggested that 20% of participants were victims of cyber-bullying in 2010 and 20% of them reported bullying others in an online environment (Patchin & Hinduja, 2013). However, when comparing real life violence and online violence, face-to-face verbal and physical violence is much more common than online violence (Williams & Guerra, 2007).

Looking at the studies and examining the link between violent media and aggressive behavior, it is seen that there are some significant moderator variables, which means that individuals are

not influenced by violent content of the media at the same level. Ferguson, San Miguel, and Hartley (2009) reported that depression and delinquent peer association were reported as the strongest and consistent antecedents of youth violence. They also stated that the size of predictors was small so that considering just a single factor may be misleading. In this context, characteristics of individuals, content of the media, and social environment all have significant roles (Anderson et al., 2003).

Individual Differences and Influence of Violent Media

There may be individual differences in terms of interpreting the violent content in media and the reaction to those contents. Paik and Comstock (1994) found younger people were more likely to show violent and anti-social behavior as a result of violent media exposure from TV. A longitudinal analysis demonstrated that violent behavior varied compared to different age groups. While the effect of violent media on aggressive behavior was found in children, such significant results were not found in adolescents. However, Johnson et al. (2002) found in a longitudinal analysis that 30-year-olds who are exposed to violent TV content, were more likely show aggressive and violent behavior compared to younger individuals aged 16 to 22 years old (Johnson, Cohen, Smailes, Kasen, & Brook, 2002). Therefore, there are mixed results in terms of age-related influences regarding the relationship between violence and media exposure.

With respect to gender difference in the United States, Eron et al. (1972) found that boys were more likely to show violent behavior as a result of being exposed to violent media (Eron, Huesmann, Lefkowitz, & Walder, 1972). Furthermore, there may be gender differences in terms of the type of violent behavior. For instance, Huesmann et al. (2003) reported that early exposure to violent media content may lead to indirect violence committed by girls at a later age. That kind of tendency was not found for boys. Instead, boys who were exposed violent media content at early ages were more likely to commit physical violence—which is a direct form of violence—at a later age compared to girls. Therefore, the form of violence matters with respect to gender difference; in regards to the link between violent tendencies and media exposure.

Some individuals may be more prone to aggressiveness and violence compared to others. In this case, people who have more of a tendency towards violence may be at great risk to be influenced by TV, movies, and video games (Bushman, 1995; Bushman & Geen, 1990). Nevertheless, those findings do not mean that people having lesser tendencies towards violence are not influenced by violent media content (Kılıç, 2017). Previous studies show that people having lesser tendencies to commit violence were significantly affected by violent media (Gentile & Anderson, 2003; Huesmann et al., 2003). The relationship, in terms of aggressive tendencies and being influenced by violent media, may not be clear. For instance, individuals who are more prone to commit violence, may consciously expose themselves to violent media in order to justify themselves (Bushman, 1995).

There are some weak arguments regarding the moderator role of intelligence with the link between media exposure (e.g., TV, video games) and violent behavior. Some argue that children with less cognitive capacity tend to be more aggressive in their behavior compared to those with higher cognitive capacities (Huesmann, Eron, & Yarmel, 1987). However, considering that intelligent children would be more likely to quickly learn violent behavior that they observed, the possibility to implement such violent behavior may be more probable as well. Thus, there may be contrasting influences regarding intelligence and the effects of violent media. Further research needs to be conducted on the moderating role of intelligence (Huesmann et al., 2003).

The perception of individuals, the reality of what they observe in media, and how the individual associates the violent behavior with his/her identity may be significant factors on the level of media influence. It was shown that realistic depictions in the media increased

violent tendencies (Geen, 1975). Besides, characteristics of figures who commit violence in the media may be another factor that could contribute to the effects of media content. As indicated by Bandura (2001), people are more likely to be influenced by others who are of the same age, gender, and ethnicity.

Lastly, apart from the effects that such media content may cause dependence and isolation from one's social environment, there are many studies which ask a fundamental question of whether or not violent media leads to aggression and violent tendencies in young people. Results suggested that violent media significantly predicted aggression and violent behavior (e.g., Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Anderson et al., 2003; Bijvank, Konjin, & Bushman, 2012; Eron, Gentry & Schlegel, 1994). However, the existing body of knowledge emphasizes that variables of the potential moderator and mediator have been rarely examined in the context of association between the violent tendencies of youth and the media (Kanz, 2016). Consequently, youth violence in online environments needs further descriptive and preventive research.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Even if there are benefits of the Internet, such as youths having the opportunity to express themselves and communicate with both peers and family members, it also necessary to consider the problematic results of the online communication; that it provides greater anonymity which could breed increased hostility with respect to interpersonal reactions (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). Moreover, violence in media may not only appear in online environment, but also induction of violence in media is highly possible through TV and offline violent video games (Bushman & Geen, 1990). Thus, that high possibility to be exposed violence through different sorts of media contents may lead to negative psychological consequences as it was discussed.

In addition to mentioning the consequences and risk factors that violent media that may appear in youths and adults, preventive implications should be considered. For instance, reducing the exposure of young people to violent media could be a certain type of prevention, due to the fact that not being aware of the presence of some websites (e.g., satanic websites) might be protective for youths (Ybarra et al., 2008). Therefore, blocking and filtering settings should be considered and followed by families. These suggestions are noteworthy since exposure to media violence can be much more controllable before it is introduced compared to other violence-related exposure such as community violence. In addition, although there are age restrictions in video games or movies shown both in TV and cinema, the question remains regarding to what extent parents follow those restrictions. In this case, parents have a great responsibility to minimize the influence of violent media.

Nevertheless, sometimes violent media content may be inevitable for children despite of caution from parents. For instance, as reported in the United States, more than 70% of individuals from 8 to 18 years old have a television in their bedroom, which means that there are more suitable occasions to watch TV without supervision from parents (McDonough, 2009). Considering such situations, parents should give feedback in order to help children in order to discuss and interpret what was seen in the media. This kind of feedback is especially useful in early ages to get insight about negative content, since there are arguments related to how constantly being exposed to violent media could desensitize people when encountering bloody and traumatic scenes. Supporting that, findings suggested people may react less negatively against traumatic scenes, which in turn, could be perceived as something normal (Anderson et al., 2010; Kirwil & Huesmann, 2003). In this context, it is quite critical that perpetrators on social media may approve violence against peers as a normative behavior in real life occasions (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). However, if a juvenile's social environment could provide occasions to develop alternative attitudes towards violence, then perspectives approving violent behavior can be reduced. This way, even if media violence is shown as

acceptable and something rewarded, adaptive normative beliefs about real life occasions can be obtained in children. Finally, aforementioned suggestions are quite significant since early prevention influences not only future attitudes and behaviors of children themselves, but also, society as a whole.

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