Television Violence: A Reflection of the Views of Children in South Africa

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Abstract
Contrary to what is commonly available in literature, this study examines children's view about their understanding of television violence. The participants were selected using a stratified sampling procedure. The data analysed showed that the children are very conscious of violent contents on their televisions and would eschew it where possible. Findings about younger participants in the study show that they believe television violence is real as opposed to older ones. The children's views about the WWE wrestling came along gender line and age. The older boys and the young participants of both sexes (58%) believe WWE wrestling is real as opposed to 42 percent who are mainly girls of older ages. Regarding their favourite characters, the female participants prefer characters who are funny, nice and with good personality. Boys, on the other hand prefer characters with actions and full of energy. Finally, the data showed that the children would imitate their favourite characters based on their discernment of what is good. This, in other words shows that the children are able to make critical judgement of television characters' behaviours.

Key Words: Television violence, desensitisation theory, cultivation theory, social learning theory, violent content.

Introduction

Television as a means of entertainment, education and information, is a common asset in people's homes (Anderson, Berkowitz, Donnerstein, Huesmann, Johnson, Linz, Malamuth & Wartella, 2003). Although, it is watched by everybody at homes, children spend more time watching it than their parents who are busy engaging in different socio-economic activities (Edgar and Edgar, 2011). Television is a catalyst in terms of its role as a socialising agent (Kader, 2006), and study has also documented that it leads to social vice among children who are exposed to its violence contents (Hoffner, Levine & Toohey, 2008).

Television violence is blamed for high crime rate among other negative things attributed to it. It is generally believed that although crime is committed mostly by adults, it has its roots in exposure to television violence as a child (Gerbner & Gross, 1986). The general conclusion in literature is that children who are exposed to violent television contents are predisposed to aggressive behaviour and this is likely to manifest later in their lives as adults (Pretorius, 2006). While adults can control what they watch on their television sets and are able to know that most of the programmes are for entertainment

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purposes, Kader (2006) remarks that children watch television for what gratifies them. Some of these programmes are violent in nature, although they may not appear to be explicitly violent. For example, children's cartoons have been condemned by many scholars because some are implicitly violent in nature. Unfortunately, they are children's favourite and many parents do not object to their children watching them. Chandler (1992) observes that there is more violence in cartoons than in any other fictional programmes. This is true about World Wrestling Entertainment (henceforth to be referred to as WWE), which is meant for adult but some parents have no problem allowing their children to watch it.

It is these violent television contents, among others, which children are exposed to that have caught the interest of many mass media scholars who have investigated the issues in detail and it is also the focus of this study. Specifically, this study will seek to investigate the view of children about violent contents on television. In order to do this, pupils in two primary schools in Eastern Cape, South Africa, will be interviewed.

Television and violence
Nowadays, there is hardly a home in urban areas without a television set in the family living room. Its ubiquity at homes has been the reason media scholars have concluded that it does not only help to entertain and educate but it is a socialising agent besides the traditional social agents such as family and school (Hoffner *et al.*, 2008; Kader, 2006).

Early television experiences, as explained by Berry and Mitchell-Kernan (1982), play an important role in the lives of children such as those from low-income families, from certain minority groups and from families in which the parents have low levels of academic achievement and difficulties with reading. These subgroups, according to them, rely heavily on television both for information about the world and for entertainment than their peers. Consequently, the viewing of television shows, especially ones meant for younger audience compensate to some extent for the lack of diverse educational experiences in these populations and may increase their school readiness (Van den Broek, 2001). To these, Adams (1992: 118) adds that television provides the greatest use of "free time" for most people including children and this is evident in all societies.

Conversely, Hoffner *et al.* (2008) argue that television has its downside, especially its portrayal of some occupations as glamorous, with high income and less effort, which in reality is not the case. To Dorr (in Fabes, Wilson and Christopher, 1989), television is not a socialising agent because most of what it presents is seen as fantasy, antithetical to the values of its audience and therefore is not taken seriously by those – including children – who watch it. One of the drawbacks of television which is repeatedly mentioned by scholars is its perceived contribution to violence in children. Perhaps this is the reason Mutsvairo (2010) refers to it as a scapegoat that is easily blamed when there is an outbreak of violence.

Early research about effect of television violence on children (Hopkins, 1986) suggests that television violence is potentially harmful to children in terms of the way it can affect their values and perceptions of the world as well as the tendency to copy the aggressive behaviour they see on it. However, according to Hopkins (1986), this conclusion has so many limitations as it shows no certainty regarding television violence being the direct cause of aggressive behaviour. In support of Hopkins' statement, Lotter (2005) maintains that there is no clear answer regarding whether media violence causes increased levels of aggression in children. He bases his argument on a research done by Andrea Martinez at the University of Ottawa in 1994.This research concludes that media violence is hard to define and measure, hence researchers generally contradict themselves about screened violence and aggression. He further argues that even for those researchers who agree that there is a link between media violence and aggression, there is however no agreement on how one affects the other. Contrary to this view, Anderson *et al.* (2003)

and Beckman (1996), maintain there is overwhelming evidence that children who are exposed to media violence behave aggressively both when they are young and as adult. According to Beckman, children are active visual learners hence television becomes a suitable teacher as it is very visual and intense. Manali (2000) also concludes that children who are exposed to television violence are bound to think that the world around them is similar and that people around them are all violent hence they become over-aggressive in character. Citing findings from longitudinal studies, Anderson *et al.* (2003) remark that television violence affect children as they are likely to hit their playmates, argue aggressively among themselves and are generally disobedient and impatient.

Another way television violence has been studied looks at the effect of television violence on children at different stages of their lives. Josephson (1995) focuses her research in this regard on children in their infancy stage, early childhood or pre-school stage, middle childhood or elementary school stage and finally the adolescent stage. She suggests that as children grow through these life stages so does their susceptibility to television violence. She further concludes that children in the toddler to elementary school are more vulnerable to television violence than those in the adolescent as they invest less mental effort in their viewing of television, thus processing all television content as real. This also goes to show that limited mental capacity makes children in these stages to want to imitate the violence and be more like the super heroes they see on screen. On the other hand, children in the adolescent stage have the capability of reasoning, although they rarely use this ability when watching television (Josephson, 1995). This extent of reasoning capacity considerably gives some adolescence children the platform to doubt the reality of television, given Josephson's argument.

Theoretical explanation of television violence

Theory enables researchers to support and validate their claims (Lindlof &Taylor, 2011). Thus, different theoretical constructs relevant to this study have been discussed as they help to not only provide the perspectives scholars have looked at television violence but also support some of the findings in the study. Some of the theories discussed in this study in terms of the effects of television violence are desensitisation, observational learning and cultivation theory.

Desensitisation theory

One of the long-term effects of television violence is desensitisation. This, as noted by Watson and Hill (2006: 79) is when people become "less sensitive to human suffering as a result of relentless exposure to ... suffering in the media". Anderson *et al.* (2003: 96) refers to this as *emotional desensitisation* which occurs when "people who watch a lot of media violence no longer respond with as much unpleasant physiological arousal as they did initially". In other words, using desensitisation to explain the effect of television violence, it means the more people are exposed to television violence, the more they see violence as normal. Basically, exposure to television violence makes them to become tolerant to media diet of violence (Watson & Hill, 2006).

Exposure of viewers with a phobia for violence to television violence reduces their initial anxiety to phobia reactions and as evidenced in research, it may ultimately result in absence of phobia for violence (Anderson *et al.*, 2003). As a result of desensitisation, exposure to violence decreases people helpful tendency towards victims of violence (Carnagey *et al.*, 2003, cited in Anderson *et al.,* 2003). This has been used to explain why violence seems to be taken for granted in most societies. In other words, what constitutes as violence in one society or community may not be regarded as such in other – this can be either in the manner it is qualified or the way the society shows general indifference to matters concerning violence.

The cultivation theory

Cultivation theory, as proposed by George Gerbner and associates, has been one of the theories used by scholars to explain the effects of television violence (Defleur and Ball-Rokeach 1989). The theory as put forward by its proponents means that the more television violence viewers are exposed to, the more their perceptions are altered (Venkatesan, 2008). Using cultivation theory to explain people's television watching habit, Karyn (2009) remarks that the more time people spend "living" in the television world the more likely they believe that social reality aligns to the reality portrayed on television. Similarly, children or adults who are heavy viewers of television violence see the world as dangerous place and as reflected on television they, therefore, see the world as mean and dangerous (see Slotsve, Del Carmen, Server & Watkins, 2008; Pretorius, 2006).

The social learning theory

This theory was formulated by Albert Bandura and his associates in the 1960s (Defleur and Ball-Rokeach, 1989). The social learning theory is based on the understanding that children and adolescents learn by observing the behaviour of others – a process referred to as observational learning (Kirsh, 2001). Bandura contends that anything that can be learned from direct experience can be learned vicariously (learning by observing others) and that in many cases learning observationally is more efficient than the trial and error of direct experience learning (Nussbaum, Pecchion, Robinson & Thompson, 2000).

According to the social learning theory, it is worth noting that when no consequences are levied against a modelled action, the observer perceives the behaviour to have been tacitly approved. For example Bandura finds that after watching a short movie, which involves kicking and yelling, children would repeat what they have seen. Children imitate this behaviour under two conditions: (a), the models were reinforced for their combative actions or (b) no consequences were levied against the models (Bandura 1977 in Anderson *et al*. 2003). In contrast when models were punished, children imitate the behaviours to a much lesser extent (Kirsh, 2010).

Social learning is conceptualised as *identification* by Watson and Hill (2006: 128) and to them it means the incorporation of "characteristics of an admired person into one's own identity by adopting that person's system of values".

Method of Research

A qualitative approach was used to gather information for this study. Qualitative research is a tool for studying what underpins a decision reached, attitude and behaviours and meaning people attach to an experience and circumstance (Ritchie, 2010). As this study is to explore or describe participants' understanding of television violence, qualitative research was thus considered the best approach.

The target population for this study were children at two primary schools in Eastern Cape, South Africa. As it was not possible for the whole population to be participants, a stratified sampling was done in order to obtain, "greater degree of representativeness by decreasing the probable sampling error" (Babbie, 2007: 214).

The stratification variable used to further divide the population in this study was their grades. A stratification variable, according to Sarndal, Swensson and Wretman (1992: 101) is the characteristics used to subdivide the population into different strata. For this study, the children selected were from grade two to grade seven. Each of these grades represented a stratum, thus giving six strata in total. Having stratified the population, simple random sampling was used to come up with the final sample for the study. Twenty (20) students from each grade were selected to participate for the focus group and one-on-one interviews used to collect the data. Overall the sample size was one hundred and twenty (120) students.

In both the focus groups and one-on-one interviews, semi-structured interview was used. Questionnaire in the form of *aide-memoire* was used in the interviews as a guide to the questions that were asked in the interviews. The participants were in most case given the chance to digress from the questions asked where it was deemed necessary.

No specific television station was targeted as the study's focus was on general violent contents on television. However, mention was made of some violent television programme such as WWE shown on a private free-to-air television station known as e-TV.

The analysis of the data took the form of manual coding by way of categorising them in order to sort out units of data with regard to property or pattern they have in common (Lindlof &Taylor, 2011). This was followed by a brief description and highlighting of data that cut across different patterns identified.

Discussion and findings

The findings of this study will be presented in line with the objectives of this study and under each of the objectives a set of related sub-themes is discussed. The objectives are as follows:

- Children's views about television violence.
- Children's ability to identify what is real and what is not on television.
- Children's judgement of television characters.

Views about television violence

The primary objective of this study is to find out the views of children about television violence. That is, the understanding of children about violence and how this understanding reflects in their interpretation of television violence.

Thus, in order test the children understanding of television, they were asked in the focus group and one-on-one interviews to first give their understanding of violence. Though the children's views were not very precise, generally the children concurred that violence is characterised by fighting, gunshots, swearing, shouting at each other and the shedding of blood. Some of the children responses are as follows:

> **Participant 1:** *Violence is when I see people fighting and hurting each other.*

> **Participant 2:** *I once experienced violence when I had a fight with one of my classmates over a certain misunderstanding.*

> **Participant 3:** *I have heard gunshots in our community, though I did not witness the shooting myself; I think shooting is a form of violence.*
> From the foregoing, it can be concluded that the children understand what violence means. In addition, seventy-eight percent (N=94) of the children said they have been exposed to or seen some form of violence directly or indirectly either at school or at home. This is one of the views put across by Bandura in his explanation of the social learning theory that the social learning of violence is influenced by environmental experience (Isom, 1998). In the case of the children investigated in this study, it means their understanding of violence is a reflection of the violence environment they live. This is true in view of Blaser's (2008) observation that most South African children are exposed to violence in schools than any other place.
> The same responses characterise the children's responses about television violence. The following responses were given by some of the participants:

> *Participant 16: Television violence is when a television programme contains people fighting or shouting at each other.*

> *Participant 18: It is the same violence that we have pointed out before, except that now we will be watching it on television.*

> *Participant 26: Television violence contains people who are using violent means to entertain television viewers.*

Significant number of participants, 60 percent (N=72) listed programmes such as WWE wrestling, The A-Team, WWE wrestling, and Zone 14 to mention just but a few as some of the television programmes that are violent in nature because they have scenes where people are fighting, swearing, shooting at each other or even shouting at each other violently. This indicates that the participants are aware of what television violence is. A further proof that some of the children understand what television violence is that they pointed out that their parents told them that all programmes with a "V" on the extreme left corner of the screen have violent contents. And in some, it would be stated beforehand that there are traces of violence, especially movies.

Overall attitudes and views of television violence
From the data analysed above, the children understand what television violence is and the analysis of the data collected showed that majority of the children do not condone violence as most of them said "violence is bad". However, for entertainment purposes, the overall view expressed by 70 percent (N=84) was that violence shown on television was quite fascinating and entertaining to watch. This resonates with study done by Grossman and Degaetano (1999), who remark that children are thrilled by violent content on screen and the feeling associated with the violent images makes them seek more of it to watch. These following responses represent their views in this regard:

> *Participant 30: I like wrestling despite all the fighting and violence involved, it is quite entertaining.*

> *Participant 15: Sometimes the way people are beaten in WWE makes me laugh; it is so funny and interesting.*

> *Participant 20: The fights in WWE and other violent movies make them more exciting and you can never fall asleep when watching them.*

> *Participant 6: The actors in violent movies don't give up, the more he is beaten, the more he seems to have more strength to deal with his opponents. This is the reason I stay to see the end.*

> *Participants 41: Violence programme keep you awake because it is interesting.*

Ability to identify what is real and what is not on television
The second objective of this study was to find out whether the children know that the violence contents of the television programmes are not real. Their responses showed that majority (N=72) of them are aware that the violence on television is not real but mere performance or acting and this is the reason they see it as 'screen violence'. For example, some of the children responded as follows:

> *Participant 10*: *I think the violence on television is fake, because most of the times some of the characters you see being shot dead, you see them again in another television show. I do not know how they do it, but it is not real.*

> *Participant 9*: *I enjoy watching violent television shows but I can tell it is fake because the violence is extreme and beyond what human beings can take.*

> *Participant 6*: *The violence I see on television is too electrified, for example the terminator movies often shown on e.tv seem fake to me, but I enjoy them.*

> *Participant 58*: *The violence is not real, just entertainment but they try to make it look like real.*

In general, the children's responses indicate a high level of awareness about the reality of violence on television. In other words, they understand that television violence is a performance carefully scripted to entertain viewers. Buttressing their views, some of the children said the people portraying on-screen violence are just actors who in most cases are different in real life.

Further views shared by the children showed they are very informed about the concept of television violence. Some of the children said whenever they watch violence on television they imagine or see it as real in order to enjoy it. They identify with the violence on television as real at the moment they are watching, although knowing that it might not be real after all. This view was generally supported in the focus group interview. As some of the children pointed out:

> *Participant 33*: *If you watch a television programme telling yourself that what you are watching is not real, you will not enjoy it.*

> *Participant 22*: *You just flow with them to entertain yourself.*

In addition, television violence is also seen differently by the children who were participants in this study. Some of them 55 percent (N=66) regarded television violence as a dramatic representation of the real life violence. Other children 20 percent (N=24) see television violence as an imaginary representation of the people who have scripted it. This goes to show that the children are not passive recipients of television content as they were able to construct their own cognitive sense of the violence they see on screen. It was also noted that ability to distinguish whether television violence is real or not depends on factor such as age of the children.

In this study, children from grade two to seven with age variation between seven to eleven years were used. As it turned out, students in grade two and three who are quite younger in age seemed a bit confused in making the distinction between real and fake or fantasy programme. They form the bulk of 25 percent (N=30) who believed that television violence is real. For example three responses that stand out in this regards say that:

> *Participant 12*: *Yes, it is true. I see blood coming out of John Cena head.*

> *Participant 27*: *It is real, sometimes, when people are hurt they call ambulance to take them to hospital.*

> *Participant 58*: *It is not fake, the cops are all there, you can really see the shooting, people dying and some people crying.*

This reflects the level at which on-screen violence can affect the children of younger ages. For example, Stadler (2004: 6) states that "Young children who do not fully understand much of what they see are more likely to be affected by obvious textual features like spectacular instances of screen violence with impressive special effects". However, the children from grade four to seven who are older were quite confident in giving their responses on the reality of television shows. In addition, children's ability to distinguish between reality and fake on television also depended on their identification with television characters as real people, who have real lives outside of their acting roles. In this case, some claimed they have seen or met some local actors who were violent in television. Other claims, they had heard of people who met some of these local actors on the street.

Perceptions of the reality of specific violent content such as WWE wrestling
Wrestling is one of the favourite television programmes mentioned by the participants in this study, hence it is important to find out their views about the reality of the programme. WWE wrestling is broadcast on e.tv television station several times in different slots during the week. Generally, the participants believe that television violence is not real but they differed in their views regarding their perception of the realness or otherwise of wrestling. Forty two percent (N=50) of the participants believed that the wrestling is not real. They pointed out that just like most television shows, the wrestlers they see in wrestling are just actors. The following selected responses from some of the participants indicate their views in this regard:

> *Participant 1*: *I think violence is not so real, because how come when the wrestlers are fighting no one ever bleeds even after all those fists and punches.*

> *Participant 4*: *I believe wrestling is just like acting, it also is scripted that who is to fight with whom, on what day and who is going to win.*

> *Participant 11*: *I do not think the fighting in wrestling is real, I think they will just be acting, because at times the way the wrestlers provoke each other into a fight is just an act.*

> *Participant 19*:*It doesn't seem real to me because how come they can be mad and beat their referees sometime.*

In contrast, fifty eight percent (N=70) argued that WWE wrestling is real and that it should not be compared with other violent television programmes such as movies and films which contain people who are apparently acting. These participants were mostly boys and the younger ones between seven to nine years old of both sexes.

In addition and interestingly, the participants' view about whether wrestling on television is real or fake came out along gender line. Majority of the children who viewed wrestling as real were boys and young ones of both sexes. They argued that wrestling to them is like any other physical sporting codes such as boxing and karate, hence to them it is real. For example in the following responses they argued that:

> *Participant 5*: *Wrestling is a more advanced version of boxing and so I think it is real.*

> **Participant 10:** *It is real and the wrestlers go for training and practice just like any other sports people do, that is why they become professionals in the field.*

> **Participant 15:** *I think wrestling is real because I went to watch a match in Durban when they came to South Africa in August of this year (2011).*

> **Participant 18:** *Yes it is real, because sometimes the wrestlers get hurt and you can see an ambulance and doctors coming to get them.*

To the female participants, they were vehement in their views, which is diverse but point to one fact that wrestling is not real even though it is a physical contact sporting code. According to one of them:

> **Participant 6**: *It looks real but you can see it is choreographed or stage-managed. The fact that there is no law and anything is possible in order to win tells me it is not real.*

The data about whether wrestling is real or not real that came along gender line was not investigated further in this study. The younger children (both sexes) between seven to nine years of age also said wrestling is real. This is not surprising given that earlier in this study, they also gave similar response about television violence. The obvious conclusion here has to do with their ages, hence their judgement or view is based on the nature of what they see on television.

Although the participants differed in their views about the reality of WWE wrestling, they all agreed that the violence contained in it, whether fake or real, is exciting and entertaining and it kept them on the edge such that they are always left wanting more. This agrees with the study done by Stewart and Williams (2000) in which they report the more violence children are exposed the more they demand and want to see more violent contents on the screen.

Given their favourite view about WWE wrestling and in line with the third objective of this study, the participants were asked to state their favourite television characters in the WWE wrestling. This is necessary to ascertain how the children feel about the characters portraying violence on television. Characters such as John Cena, The Undertaker and Batista were mentioned by the fifty five percent (N=66) of the participants as their favourites. The participants pointed out that they were thrilled by their moves and their stage personality.

The naming of favourite characters among the participants was however gender based. Base on the responses given above, it is quite clear that the female participants favoured characters with such qualities such as having a good personality, being a nice person and being a funny person. Boys on the other hand favoured characters full of energy and action. They seemed to like those characters with "cool moves" especially when it comes to fighting. Their favourite characters were the heroes and villains in most television shows. This proves, therefore, that male participants are more enticed by the violence on screen than the female participants. This can be attributed to the socialisation process, which according to Chaplin, Cole and Waxler (2005) influences how the gender differences reflect in emotional attachment to characters. It was therefore evident in this study that as girls are socialised to be soft hearted beings, they inevitably identify themselves with soft and nice characters (Chaplin *et al.*, 2005). Boys on the other hand, are according to Chaplin *et al.* (2005) socialised to be manly, to stand for themselves and not show weak emotions hence it is not surprising that they favoured the hard-core characters.

Imitation of television characters
Following the identification of their favourite characters, the participants were asked if they have at any time imitated their favourite characters. There were varying responses to this question as some confirmed that they do sometimes imitate some of the things they see on television, which they judge as good but they could not give an explicit answer regarding what they consider as good. Some participants (40 percent, [N=48]) however stated that they did not imitate anyone on television. Some of the responses given are as follows:

> *Participant 29: We do practice some of the moves we see on WWE wrestling with my   friends during playtime. We try however to imitate the less dangerous moves as some of them look extremely dangerous and could lead to us hurting each other.*

> *Participant 14: We always imitate some of the characters' funny remarks when talking to my girl friends.*

> *Participant 32: Some of the characters are cool and the way they dress and talk is not bad, we imitate these.*

It was clear therefore from the responses that participants were not as passive recipients of television contents as they have been portrayed to be by scholars such as Hoek and Laurence (1991), who say that children tend to imitate everything they see their heroes and role models doing on television. Contrary to Hoek and Laurence's research, the children in this study said they have the cognitive ability to imitate what is good behaviour and leave out the bad behaviour about their favourite characters on violent television programmes. The general finding was that most children imitate what they see on screen according to their own understanding of what it is good or bad. As it also emerged from the findings, the children imitated their heroes and role models on television to such an extent that some of them labelled themselves with their names and would want their friends to call them with those names when they are playing.

Conclusion
Television violence has negative consequence on children who are exposed to it. Different research studies reported in present study confirmed it and most of the participants in this study shared the same view. However, they watch programmes with violent contents because they are entertaining and fascinating. As indicated in this study, the children generally concluded that television violent is not real but programme that is scripted to entertain. With younger children, according to the data, they believe television violent is real.

The present study also showed that the children would only imitate the behaviour of the characters or their heroes they consider good, though it was not clear what they meant by good behaviour.

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