

## **MEDIA INFLUENCE AND VIOLENT CRIMES IN THE NIGER DELTA REGION OF NIGERIA**

**ENE, Warikiente Robert**

Department Of Sociology and Anthropology,  
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences,  
Federal University Otuoke, Yenagoa, Bayelsa State, Nigeria.  
Email: c/o [stanleyboroh@yahoo.com](mailto:stanleyboroh@yahoo.com): Tel: 08064350554

### **Abstract**

Media violence is viewed by social psychologists, sociologists, social workers and communication scholars as a causal risk factor to aggression and violent crimes in the society. This paper examined the problem of media influence and violent crimes in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The objective was to show that unregulated viewing of visual media and computer games by youths exacerbate violent behaviours and crimes in the Niger Delta. Much of the research on media and violent crimes has been influenced by Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory. This paper rests on the same framework to theorize that violent crimes by youths follow a learning pattern that comes from media sources of today's information society. Relying on secondary methods of data collection such as extensive content analysis, the study revealed that social risks associated with the media is worrisome in contemporary times where the youths are more exposed to the media via the various channels such as television, radio, video players, internet and most recently, computer games. Violent crimes have also increased to be part of the media content in all aspects of still and motion viewings. It is therefore the position of this paper that the rise in violent crimes is not unrelated to the consumption of violent but sometimes fictional criminality through the mass media. Lastly, the paper submits that by showing violent characters as heroes in the media, children and teens imitate the behaviours of the characters in the movies or computer games and by extension act out these behaviours in their everyday life.

**Keywords:** *Media influence, Communication, Violence, Crime, Niger Delta*

### **Introduction**

The depiction of violence in the media has been seen by many social psychologists, sociologists, social workers as well as communication scholars as a causal risk factor to aggression and violent crimes in society. This view is mainly backed by the Social Learning Theory of Bandura cited in Ugiagbe (2009) who posited that individuals learn certain behavioral traits by copying what they see others do. This is referred to as 'modelling'.

The presentation of violent crimes in media encourages observers, especially youths to act aggressively with advanced technology. The media has been able to influence the perceptions, attitudes, emotions as well as the behaviour of many youths. It is pertinent to note that youths are more vulnerable or susceptible to external influence due to their bio-physical conditions that make them desire autonomy and independence from their parental domination. They are easily influenced by cult figures, musicians, actors and actresses seen in the movies and become trouble makers, rebellious and enter into conflict with authority figures at home, school and community (Iwarimie-Jaja, 2010). This has contributed to the incidence of violent crimes ranging from murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault and terrorism in so many parts of the world and this is especially true of Nigeria. This adverse social behaviour arising from the negative influence of the media on youths has continued to undermine the socio-economic, political and psychological well being of the Nigerian society.

This paper tries to look at the link between media influence and violent crimes in Nigeria, using the Niger Delta region as its case study. The major objective of this paper is to show that unregulated viewing of visual media and computer games by youths exacerbate violent behaviours and crimes in the Niger Delta. It is important to note that the adverse effect of the media on youths, has led to a near erosion of the sense of safety and security as more youths imbibe a culture of violence and criminality. It is the intention of this paper that findings and suggestions for mitigation would go a long way to help in reducing the menace of media induced violent crimes in the Niger Delta region and Nigeria at large. This is needed because it will definitely contribute to existing knowledge on media literature by revealing to the public the hidden truth about the adverse influence of the media on youths. In so doing, the general public and the policymakers (government) will be more enlightened and adopt methods to check this social menace.

### **The Media and Violent Scenes**

The mass media are ways of communication that are intended to reach a large audience via mass communication. The technologies through which this communication takes place vary. In this article, we shall concern ourselves mostly on the electronic media, especially the television, movies and video games. Jacque and William (2013) reported that 94% of the most popular movies since 1985 contain at least one violent scene, and half of those involve a gun. Bushman et. al., (2013) found in their study on media violence that violence in films has more than doubled since 1950, and gun violence in PG-13-rated films has more than tripled since 1985. This goes to show that the larger part of the population, especially the youths are increasingly exposed to violence in the television and movies. It should also be noted that the watching of movies has become one of the favorite pastimes for the youths as they spend about 50% more of their out-of-school time on that activity than on any other activity.

Another medium of mass communication that has been of more influence to youths, especially in the middle to upper class society is computer games. Computer games are unique in that they are not only viewed like movies, they are more interactive. Computer games are a unique form of media because they encourage

players to become a part of the game's script. Today's sophisticated video games require players to pay constant attention to the game. Players engage on deeper level—physically and emotionally—than people do when watching a movie or television programme. The players control the game's characters and how they interact with other elements in the game. Some games reward the players for violent behaviours where the player can control the character into robbing or killing other elements for virtual cash in the game.

The sale of computer games and movies has skyrocketed in recent times, showing that they are fast gaining deeper penetration into society. As these increase, so does the spread of violent media content. By age 18, American children would have seen 16,000 murders and 200,000 acts of violence depicted in violent video games, movies, and television (Brad and Craig, 2009).

### **Operationalizing Violent Crimes**

Violent crimes encapsulate harmful, destructive and injurious acts such as murder, manslaughter, rape and aggravated assault amongst others. It is a dyadic interaction between an offender and a victim in which coercive force is applied by the former to subdue the latter by inuring him or her taking away his or her properties and causing him or her death (Iwarimie-Jaja, 2012). Suffice it to say that in any form it takes, violent crimes are capable of threatening and disorganizing the society. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation FBI (2010), violent crimes are composed of four offenses: murder and non-negligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault. Violent crimes include crimes where intentional harm is inflicted against another individual during the commission of the crime. Additionally, violent crimes can include the threat of intentional harm. The infliction of the harm can include the use of weapons, bodily contact, and more. These are considered the most serious crimes and carry a sentence of one year or more in prison (Iwarimie-Jaja, 2012)

Aggravated assault means an attack or attempted attack with a weapon, regardless of whether an injury occurred, and an attack without a weapon when serious injury results. When a serious injury occurs, it may include either broken bones, lost teeth, internal injuries, unconsciousness or any other injury requiring two or more days at the hospital bed. A gun, knife or other object capable of causing harm (e.g. spiked wood, heavy stones) are considered as weapons in the case of aggravated assault.

Rape is considered as forced sexual intercourse. Forced sexual intercourse includes both psychological coercion as well as physical force. Forced sexual intercourse means vaginal, anal or oral penetration by the offender. Rape may also include incidents where the penetration is from a foreign object such as a bottle. Attempted rape is also considered a violent crime in most parts of the world.

Murder is usually classified as the unlawful killing of another human being without a valid excuse or justification and usually done with malice aforethought. This is to say that murder is usually a planned act of violence carried without a reasonable provocation from the victim. A reasonable provocation may be in the case of self defense. According to the Criminal Code Act of Nigeria (1990), any person who steals anything, and, at or immediately before or immediately after the time of stealing it, uses

or threatens to use actual violence to any person or property in order to obtain or retain the thing stolen or to prevent or overcome resistance to its being stolen or retained, is said to be guilty of robbery.

### **The Media and Violent Crimes: Towards an Analytical Linkage**

The study on the effects of the media on behaviour in modern times has been greatly influenced by the work of Albert Bandura cited in Ugiagbe (2009) and Adishi (2011) on social learning, which suggests that individuals learn by modeling the behaviour of others in society through observation. Bandura conducted a series of experiments where children were shown a video of an adult exhibiting aggressive behaviour towards a doll. Afterwards, the children are given the doll as a play toy; most of the children replicated the aggressive acts that they saw on the video.

Another effect of violent media on aggression and violent crime is desensitization. Desensitization refers to reduced cognitive responsiveness to actual violence as a result of prolonged exposure to violent content in the media. Paludi (2011) suggests that violent crime in the media may spark some form of hostility with the possibility of affecting the way we perceive others and interpret their actions. This leads to lessening empathy towards others because the exposure to media violence has made the individual to become emotionally and cognitively desensitized to violence.

Many studies have found that through modeling, there is significant correlation between viewing violent media in television, movies and games and aggression and violent crimes later in life. Research on violent television and films, video games, and music reveals unequivocal evidence that media violence increases the likelihood of aggressive and violent behaviour in both immediate and long-term contexts (Anderson *et al.*, 2003). Other experiments have shown that exposure to media violence can increase aggressive thinking, aggressive emotions, and tolerance for aggression, all known risk factors for later aggressive and violent behaviour.

Part of the increase in aggressive behaviour is linked to the amount of time children are allowed to play computer games—and daily media use by children is increasing significantly (Andrea Norcia, 2014). Gentile and Anderson (2003) stated that the continued playing of these violent computer games may increase aggressive and violent behaviour. This is because the violent scenes are constantly repeated throughout the game. Repetition has been considered an effective method of teaching and reinforcing learning patterns. Several peer-reviewed studies have shown that children who play computer games that are violent in nature are more likely to bully and *cyberbully* their peers, get into physical fights, be hostile, argue with teachers, and show aggression towards their peers throughout the school year.

A joint statement by six leading national medical associations in the USA, including the American Medical Association and American Psychological Association stated: "Well over 1,000 studies - including reports from the Surgeon General's office, the National Institute of Mental Health, and numerous studies conducted by leading figures within our medical and public health organizations - our own members - point overwhelmingly to a causal connection between media violence and aggressive behavior in some children." They also pointed out the following:

1. Children who see a lot of violence are more likely to view violence as an effective way of settling conflicts. Children exposed to violence are more likely to assume that acts of violence are acceptable behaviour.
2. Viewing violence can lead to emotional desensitization towards violence in real life. It can decrease the likelihood that one will take action on behalf of a victim when violence occurs.
3. Entertainment violence feeds a perception that the world is a violent and mean place. Viewing violence increases fear of becoming a victim of violence, with a resultant increase in self-protective behaviors and a mistrust of others.
4. Viewing violence may lead to real life violence. Children exposed to violent programming at a young age have a higher tendency for violent and aggressive behaviour later in life than children who are not so exposed.

In addition to all the above, the social learning theory of Albert Bandura suggests that individuals don't only learn the behaviours during modeling, they also learn the skills needed for such behavioral pattern and also learn the consequences of the actions.

In a latter doll experiment by Albert Bandura, the adult exhibiting aggressive behaviour towards the doll in the video that was shown to the kids was punished by the experimenter. When the kids were presented with the same doll, they showed less aggression towards the doll than those who did not see the punishment of the adult in the video. This goes to show that individuals learn, not just the act, but also the consequences.

Most violent media today, especially in computer games are depicting violence as a means to earn some rewards in the game. A popular computer game shows the main character jacking cars to fulfill his missions or robbing pedestrians for cash that can then be used to purchase items that aid him in his missions.

These players may end up associating violent acts with rewards of a lavish lifestyle instead of punishment for the crimes. Adishi (2011), argued that children while watching these violent programmes and also playing of violent games learn the pros and cons in these movies. They just don't learn the act alone, they also tend to learn a means of maneuvering in situations when confronted with it. Suffice it to say that violence in the media has had a great impact on the lives of the children through observational learning and by so doing they become violent.

## **Conclusion**

By showing violent characters as heroes in the media, children and teens are likely to imitate the behaviours of the characters in the television, movies or computer games, children are more likely to imitate the behaviours of the characters because they see them as role models. They are also more likely to have difficulty distinguishing between reality and fantasy. Video games are the most influential of these media because they require active participation and identification with the violent characters. These reinforce violent behaviours more quickly.

Young children are more likely to confuse fantasy violence with real world violence, and without a framework for ethical decision making, they may mimic the actions they see in violent video games ( Villani, et al., 2005).

Though it is clear that the media is not the sole factor responsible for violent crime, it is, however, important that something should be done to reduce the violent content in the media and have stricter regulations as it pertains access to violent media especially by youths and children.

### **Recommendations**

Following the submissions and conclusions reached concerning the link between media influence and violent crimes, the paper recommends a multi-stakeholder approach in order to mitigate identified problems:

- **Parents** It is necessary for parents to provide adequate and morally upright socialization that reflects the main ideals of society so as to maintain and sustain an ethical moral conduct for children as they grow up into becoming youths.
- **Schools** As a continuation to the role of parenting, it is equally important for schools to ensure that students are not allowed to watch programmes or play computer games that encourage violent behaviour during school periods.
- **Government** Regulatory agencies under the government such as the National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) should take censorship laws very seriously. This will ensure that media houses operating within the country are put under check. This also goes for computer games commercial houses.
- In addition to the above, the National Orientation Agency (NOA) should undertake a widespread orientation campaign to educate the general public on the dangers associated with violent media materials especially for children and youths.

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