



## PREADOLESCENTS PERCEPTION OF TELEVISION VIOLENCE

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### **Abstract:**

This study was meant to explore preadolescents' (8-13 years) perception of violent television content and the degree to which they like and watch such programs and the reasons for watching them. Firstly, an open ended questionnaire was developed using an interview guide and administered upon 10 preadolescents. Secondly, it was administered after pilot testing to children from the schools of Islamabad and Rawalpindi (n=100). Content analysis was applied on the data using emergent coding (data-driven). Results indicated that the favorite genres turned out to be cartoons, crime shows and comedy shows. Pre-adolescents perceived violence in the television content, liked that violence, and identified with the aggressive heroes. Thus, most of the program telecast in Pakistan comprise of truly violent content perceivable and liked by children; which is an alarming signal for parents, media authorities and the children's personality.

**Keywords:** preadolescents, violence, aggression, media and television

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## 1. Introduction

Progressing technology has brought notable changes in society, one of which is media bringing social changes both for good and worse (Prot et al., 2013). Keeping in view the advent and advance of media popularity since the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a toll on violence is evident all over the world. Violence and aggression increase has been associated with various factors by prior research including exposure to violence through media including television and video games (Hussmann, 2007). This increasing televised violence has been an identified risk factor as indicated by prior research. Globalization has increased exposure to similar television in the third world developing countries as well.

In the present-day Westernized world, television plays a parent role even in the third world countries. Through the literature in Pakistan, the researchers have found the relationship of aggression with hopelessness regarding infertility (Sultan & Sarwat, 2009), parental attachment and acceptance (Ali & Misbah, 2011), gender differences (Khalid & Ruhi, 2000), remembered relationship with parents (Sattar & Humera, 2011), and self-esteem (Riaz & Zaeema, 2007). But the relationship between television violence and aggression in preadolescents is still there to be probed in the present culture and scenario of the country when violence in the form of terrorism, blasts and targeted killing is much prevalent and has widespread media coverage.

Violence is depicted through aggression purposefully. It can be through some purposeful acts or it can be verbal abuse at the same time. It can be directed towards number of people no matter in groups or individually. It obviously ends into bad consequences, which may hurt someone emotionally or physically (Krug, 2002).

According to (Huesmann, 2007), violence shown on social mediums of communications or TV depicts that it is all related to hurting someone both emotionally and physically which has very bad impact on ones' wellbeing. It is also seen that even harassing words can end up into being violent (Tropeano, 2006, Barongan and Hall, 1995; Fischer and Greitemeyer, 2006). Media violence thus includes violent acts shown through electronic or print media in the form of violent action based TV channels, movie violence, DVDs, violent video games, songs with violent lyrics, violence projected through internet and violent comic books.

## 2. Literature Review

Numerous theoretical explanations exist tracking the relationship between aggression and various personal and situational covariates such as genetic predisposition, rearing patterns, parental negligence, domestic abuse hostile thoughts, cognitions and arousal. These theories dealt with one perspective each. For instance, Psychodynamic theory traced aggression back into childhood experiences and an unseen *Thanatos* (the death instinct), behaviorists consider it a result of learning. Considering the unidimensional approach of these theories an integrative model emerged named as Model of General Aggression developed by Anderson & Bushman (2002) . This model covers situational, personality and some of the genetic predispositions which interplay to bring out different

outcomes directly relating to ones' cognitions, relating to person's emotions and the way a person acts in a particular way (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Anderson & Carnagey, 2004). This model provided the basic impetus for the present research. GAM is a broad theory which can encompass anything that is a part of environment; television violence is one of those environmental factors. It increases aggression through all routes i.e. affect, thought and arousal (Anderson & Bushman, 2001). When a person is exposed to visuals of television violence, he is expected to experience hostile affect, reaching his hostile scripts faster making him more susceptible to act aggressively as he gets aroused due to the visuals. Another short-term effect is the increased acceptance of violence (Bushman & Huesmann, 2001; Anderson et al., 2003). Increased acceptability of violence, desensitization, development of aggressive attitudes, behaviors and beliefs all are the long-term effects of watching television violence. The viewer develops a belief that this world is a hostile place and the only way to survive in it is to counter the life problems with an aggressive behavior which varies in its degree of severity and is dependent upon a several other factors as accounted by the General Aggression Model (Gentile, Lynch, Linder & Walsh, 2004).

Age is an important factor that has a strong effect on personality and behavior. Preadolescents are in a stage at which they are acquiring concepts about life, they are curious to know and fill in their minds with some scripts ready to be used when they encounter any situation. At this level they judge everything on a dichotomous scale of "good" or "bad" and their focus is upon heroism and aspirations. According to Bandura (1977), the viewer who learns from experience of another person is reinforced by the rewards he observes to be received by the actor and is likely to imitate him. According to Piaget (1964) the child's thinking becomes logical but does not attain abstract reasoning skills, thus he is not able to understand the consequences of aggressive behavior and if the perpetrator goes unharmed or some other rewards shown on television the child will likely be influenced by them more as compared to older age group with developed abstract reasoning. Prior research has evidenced the highest negative impact of violent television programming on preadolescent age group (Paik & Comstock, 1994; Bushman & Huesmann, 2001). In the present study the age group of preadolescents is selected to see whether the same effects will be seen in the present society and second, it is a tender age at which according to the research intervention is suitable and effective to control the causal and contributing factors of aggression, thus if there is a significant effect of television violence in Pakistani society this research can contribute to awareness about these effects to help decrease a plausible factor of aggression from our society.

Research inspired by the multi factorial approach of the General Aggression model has indicated that perception of violence plays a noteworthy role in the inculcation of aggression in the viewers of television violence. This effect is seen to be most evidently influencing the preadolescent age group. Television programs constitute both cartoon as well as non-cartoon violence which have proved to impart a differential effect in comparison with each other. Non cartoon, realistic violence correlates more strongly with subsequent and concurrent aggression as compared to cartoon violence, which slowly increases the acceptability for violence, as it is mostly trivialized by humor making

aggression as a part of the viewers' personality. Perceiving the televised violence thus highly influences the effects upon the viewer.

Research work on media violence and its effects started since 1950's (Baker, Lange & Ball-Rokeach; 1969) in the West. Most of the foreign channels are now accessible to most of the population in our country along with the mushroom growth of televisions so the effects of media violence so well explored in foreign countries worth contributing in aggression in our country too. However, it is important to consider that prior research evaluating the validity of the rating systems of television indicated a higher level of violence perceived by the children who watched it (Linder & Gentile, 2009). The present paper therefore aims to find out the perception of that violence by preadolescents and their preferences among the television content in our culture. The sample of preadolescents was selected because it is considered a tender age at which the young impressionable minds are most receptive, and intervention introduced at this age is easiest and most effective. Thus, a factor probably associated with aggression's exacerbation could be kept into consideration during the developmental years to reduce the probability of children turning into violent beings in a country which cannot withstand any more violence.

### 3. Material and Methods

This study was meant to explore preadolescents' perception of violent television content and the degree to which they like and watch such programs. This present study was a qualitative study in nature. An open-ended questionnaire was developed and used to explore the stated objectives. Content analysis was applied for data analysis. Firstly, an open-ended questionnaire was developed through interview method (n=10) and then applied to a relatively larger sample (n=100) and content analysis was performed for achieving the objectives stated before.

#### 3.1 Sample Details

The sample of this study consisted of 100 subjects (Males=60; Females=40) comprising preadolescent students. The age range of the sample was 8-13. All were students selected from different schools of Islamabad and Rawalpindi. The sample was selected through convenience sampling technique. The mean age of male and female preadolescents is given below. (Table 1)

**Table 1:** Sample age (n=100)

Sample Categories	N	M (S.D.)
Males	60	12.3 (3.5)
Females	40	11.4 (2.9)

#### 3.2 Material & Procedure

The instrument used in the present exploratory study was an open-ended questionnaire. Phase I of the exploratory study involved the development of the open-ended qualitative

questionnaire for the main exploratory study. This phase involved a small sample (n=10) of preadolescents. Information for the questionnaire development was achieved through interview method. The subjects were interviewed individually to collect information about preadolescents favorite programs, reasons for which they like those programs and the characters they adored most. These questions were generated from the literature review (Eron et al., 1972). The open-ended questionnaire was thus developed with the help of this data.

In Phase II of study the open-ended questionnaire was filled by the male and female preadolescents. In the present study data driven coding was used, as there was no predetermined category for coding the data, but the categories were formed after analysis of the data. The first step followed by the researcher was to write the responses given by the subjects. The responses were noted until response saturation (at least once mentioned). The second step in the content analysis was formation of the categories according to the themes presented by the subjects in the responses. Review of the literature facilitated the researcher to categorize the data. The categories were reviewed by two independent judges afterwards (i.e, psychology students). The data was analyzed by calculating the frequencies of the categories in which each program of respective genres lied. The key words (e.g. hit, weapon, help etc.) were seen to place the responses into the categories formed. The frequency was calculated at the end by placing the responses in the categories and summing the number of responses in each category. The method of calculating the frequency was decided with the help of judges as it was convenient and comprehensible to calculate the frequency by considering the frequency as yes (1) or no (0) rather than the point scale used on the scale.

The nil responses (i.e, of those who do not watch those programs) were subtracted from the total of 100 subjects. The third question about the favourite character was only considered for maintaining the objectivity of the responses and reducing the ambiguity where present in the responses to the cause of watching the program. After analysis of the data the programs watched and liked by less than 20 subjects was not considered in the final analysis as the study was intended to find the popularity and reason for watching those programs. Thus, such a low frequency was indicative of less popularity.

#### **4. Results**

The present qualitative study was based on the main objective to find the perception of children about the content shown in television programs. The first question provided the information about the degree to which the children watch television programs provided in the list prepared by a pilot study and it was rated on a six-point scale running from *never* to *most often*. The second question tapped the reason for which the subjects watch the programs, it majorly measured the perception of the subjects about the content of the programs and their likeability for those programs for the reasons they give. Seven major categories were identified by the researcher after analysis of the data. The categories were, (1) violent, (2) altruistic/ prosocial, (3) attractiveness/traits of the actors, (4) humor, (5) fantasy/fiction, (6) sensation seeking, (7) competition. Judges were informed about the

categories description to review them i.e, if responses were placed in the appropriate categories. The first category “*violent*” was described as physical force exerted to cause damage; violence can be caused by either animate or inanimate objects. Key words were fight, battle, hit, blades etc. The second category “*altruistic*” was described as any cause which is related to help or is prosocial or moralistic. Key words were help, friends, rescue, etc. The third category “*Attractiveness*” included the physical or psychological features of the actors that the subjects took as a cause of watching the program. Key words included: pretty, cute, clever etc. The fourth category “*Humor*” included all the reasons which had a perspective of being funny. Key words were: funny, teases, chases, makes faces etc. The fifth category “*fiction*” was described as all the responses which were unrealistic or fantasy oriented. Key words included magic, fairies, omnitricks, flies etc. The sixth category “*sensation seeking*” was described as any response that gave a meaning or an impression of thrill or excitement. Key words were: horror, action, adventure etc. Seventh category “*competition*” was described as any response having the concept of winning and losing. Key words were: competition, challenge, win, etc. All these categories mark the reasons for which the children watched these programs and spontaneously perceived these factors to be their part. The results of frequency and reasons for watching all the genres is summarized in Table 3 given as follows,

**Table 3:** Frequency and Reasons for watching the respective T.V. programs

No.	Programs	Freq.	V	Al	Att	H	F	S	C
1	Tom & Jerry	100	47	1	6	44	0	2	0
2	Bulbulay	92	0	0	9	83	0	0	0
3	Mr. Bean	85	9	1	75	0	0	0	0
4	CID	73	47	17	0	1	0	8	0
5	Anamika	71	8	2	30	15	1	15	0
6	Cricket	66	0	0	12	0	0	5	49
7	Chota Bheem	65	36	10	2	12	5	0	0
8	Cartoon Movies	57	18	1	14	4	12	3	5
9	Ben 10	53	37	0	2	0	14	0	0
10	Keymon	53	17	4	6	6	17	3	0
11	My Giant Friend	51	26	10	3	2	9	1	0
12	Powerpuff Girls	49	19	11	6	0	11	1	1
13	Dora	49	0	37	1	1	1	9	0
14	Spiderman	46	38	3	1	0	3	1	0
15	Courage	44	1	8	9	14	0	12	0
16	Indian Action Movies	43	36	0	2	0	0	5	0
17	Beyblade	39	3	0	1	0	0	1	34
18	Wrestling	38	35	0	1	0	0	2	0
19	Batman	34	30	2	0	0	2	0	0
20	Indian Horror Movies	33	3	0	0	0	0	30	0
21	English Action Movies	27	24	0	0	0	0	3	0
22	Reality Shows	24	3	0	6	2	0	5	8
23	Quddusi Sb.	24	0	0	0	24	0	0	0

**Note:** Freq.= Frequency of program viewers; Categories symbolized in Table 4 as, V=Violence, Al=Altruistic, Att= Attractiveness of actors, H= Humor, F=Fiction, S=Sensation Seeking, C=Competition.

The programs are arranged in descending order of viewing frequency. The results indicated that the subjects perceived the greatest number of programs as violent (11/23) the second category of the responses with respect to the reasons of watching the programs was humor (3/23). These results showed that there is a noticeable degree of violence shown in the television programs telecast in Pakistan.

The data obtained from this study answered all four questions posited by the researcher at the beginning of the chapter. The children were able to spontaneously perceive violence in the programs except where it was trivialized by humour. The second question investigated the frequency of watching the programs included in the genres which found the popularity of specific genres included in the instrument, cartoons, crime shows and comedy were their favorites and hence most frequently watched. Violent heroes were liked by the children.

Overall, the results indicate that most of the children perceive violence and like to watch it in all genres except comedy dramas. The subjects perceived crime shows and movies as most violent. The most favorite genres of the children were cartoons, comedy and crime shows. The subjects did not added news and commercials as their favorite genre while the questionnaire formation which indicates that these program are not consciously liked by the subjects but may operate on a passive level as they are displayed to the children.

## 5. Discussion

The present study was aimed at exploring the spontaneous perception of preadolescents about the violent content shown in various programs telecast on television. The qualitative study explored answers to the following questions, (1) The frequency with which the preadolescents watch different genres shown on television. (2) Reason for watching those genres. (3) Spontaneous perception of violence in the frequently watched television programs. Some expectations were set forth in the light of previous research cited in Chapter I; (a) Preadolescents would like certain television genres due to violent content present in those programs (b) Preadolescents may like the popular characters of these programs due to their violent activities (c) Violent programs are watched by preadolescents in higher frequency than the non-violent programs.

The questions posited at the beginning were answered by the results of this study. The first question investigated the frequency at which various genres were watched, result indicated that preadolescents watched three genres at the highest frequency cartoons, comedy and crime shows all of them had considerable amount of violence, support for this finding comes from the study of Potter & Warren (1998) according to which these programs had significant amount of violence. Television preferences were consistent with the research for preadolescents (Takahashi, 1991; Lorch, Bellack & Augsbach, 1987) but crime shows were a favorite among our preadolescents and among Western adolescents as indicated by prior literature (Mc Kay, 2010, Caron, Nardella, Limoges & Meunier, 1993; Hawkins, Reynolds & Pingree, 1991). This indicates a preference for violence in our children, which should be investigated further. The most

frequent reasons for watching television came out to be violence (11/23 programs were watched mainly due to violence). It was found that the children perceived violence spontaneously except where comedy trivialized violence which was found by previous researchers to trivialize violence and decrease the sensitivity towards it increasing the probability that the viewers will accept violence as legal and will practice it themselves (Gunter & Furnham, 1984; Haynes, 1978).

Children are exposed to violence through television at an alarming level, where they perceive and prefer to watch it. Violence was found at a pronounced degree even in those programs which are considered as harmless; comedy proved to be a hiding factor of this violence. Watching violence in television where most of the violent acts are performed by the hero, are justified and thus go unpunished increase the acceptability for aggression in the young developing minds. This study has important implications for researchers as this piece of data can help as a stepping stone to understand and build upon the differential long term as well as short term effects of watching televised violence. Overall, it indicates a need for parental monitoring on the screen time of children, managing and selecting the programs that are pro social in nature which according to prior research has positive effects on viewer's by decreasing their hostility and increase in prosocial behavior in real life (Saleem et al, 2012; Bushman & Anderson, 2009; Gentile et al, 2009; Mares & Woodward, 2005). Thus, utilizing these findings parents can monitor at least one probable factor that might increase the child's vulnerability for developing aggression and help develop more helpful and prosocial citizens for a better future.

### **5.1 Recommendations**

Data could have been taken from more schools of selected area and more than hundred participants could have been added in the study as research population to make increase the external validity of the results.

### **6. Conclusion**

Results indicated that the favorite genres turned out to be cartoons, crime shows and comedy shows. Pre-adolescents perceived violence in the television content, liked that violence, and identified with the aggressive heroes. Thus, most of the program telecast in Pakistan comprise of truly violent content perceivable and liked by children, which is an alarming signal for parents, media authorities and the children's personality.

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