

# Violence Viewing Effect

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## Violence Viewing Effect

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** Media Studies, Social Psychology, Communication Theory.

### 1. Core Definition

The Violence Viewing Effect (VVE) refers to a collection of psychological and behavioral changes observed in individuals following exposure to media content that features explicit or implied acts of aggression and violence. This phenomenon is rooted in the study of observational learning and the processing of narrative cues, positing that the manner in which violence is presented is critical to the potential effects on the viewer. Specifically, the effect is most pronounced when the violent act lacks realistic consequences, often manifesting under four primary conditions: when the person committing the violence faces no meaningful punishment or negative repercussions; when the physical or emotional pain inflicted upon the victim is minimized or entirely absent; when the violent action is portrayed within the narrative as being justified, necessary, or heroic; or when the perpetrator of the violence is depicted as an attractive, charismatic, or high-status individual whom the audience is inclined to admire or emulate. The VVE is not defined by a single outcome but rather encompasses a spectrum of responses, ranging from direct behavioral imitation to subtle shifts in emotional and cognitive processing.

The resulting impact of the VVE varies widely across individuals based on age, predisposition, and environmental factors, but generally falls into two distinct categories. The first category involves behavioral mimicry or observational learning, where viewers--particularly children and adolescents--may attempt to copy the specific aggressive behaviors witnessed in the media. This process is heavily mediated by the perceived success and attractiveness of the model; if the fictional character achieves a desired outcome through violence, the viewer learns that aggression can be an effective tool. The second, and often more insidious, category of effect is psychological desensitization to media violence. This involves an emotional habituation where repeated exposure causes the individual to become less emotionally responsive to violent content. This desensitization reduces empathy for victims and can normalize aggression, leading to a generalized apathy toward real-world violence and suffering.

Understanding the core definition of the VVE requires acknowledging that it operates not only on explicit learning but also on implicit cognitive structures. Exposure to media violence contributes to the formation of aggressive scripts and hostile attribution biases in memory. When an individual encounters a real-world conflict, these easily accessible aggressive scripts are more likely to be retrieved and utilized as a guide for action, even if the person does not consciously intend to replicate the specific actions seen on screen. Furthermore, the VVE is fundamentally linked to the concept of violence justification. When violence is consistently framed as justified--such as in narratives where a hero uses extreme force to resolve a conflict--the viewer's normative beliefs

about aggression are gradually altered, making violence seem like a more acceptable and proportional response in everyday life.

## 2. Etymology and Historical Development

The study of media effects, from which the Violence Viewing Effect concept emerged, began earnestly in the early 20th century, spurred by public concern over the influence of films and radio on youth behavior. Initial research, such as the influential Payne Fund Studies of the 1930s, established the foundation for investigating how mass media content might shape attitudes, though the VVE as a specific concept crystallized much later. The focus intensified significantly with the rise of widespread television ownership in the 1950s and 1960s, which brought graphic and frequent violence directly into homes, fueling immense political and social pressure to understand its potential harm.

A pivotal moment in the development of the VVE research occurred with the work of social psychologist Albert Bandura and his colleagues in the early 1960s. Their experiments, particularly the renowned Bobo doll study, demonstrated the principle of observational learning, providing empirical evidence that children could learn aggressive behaviors simply by watching models, particularly if those models were rewarded or faced no negative consequences. This research provided the foundational theoretical framework--Social Cognitive Theory--that explained the mechanism by which media viewing translates into potential behavioral effects. Following this, major governmental commissions, most notably the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior in 1972, synthesized existing data and concluded that there was a legitimate link, albeit complex, between viewing violence and subsequent aggressive behavior, cementing the VVE as a central topic in communication research.

The historical evolution of the VVE concept shifted from a simple linear model (media causes aggression) to a more sophisticated transactional model in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Researchers moved beyond mere behavioral imitation to explore cognitive and affective mechanisms. Theorists like Leonard Berkowitz introduced the concept of cognitive priming, suggesting that violent media increases the temporary accessibility of aggressive thoughts and emotions. Simultaneously, George Gerbner's Cultivation Theory contributed by addressing the long-term, chronic effects of media exposure, arguing that heavy viewing cultivates an exaggerated perception of danger and mistrust in the real world, an effect closely related to the VVE's impact on audience beliefs about the prevalence and acceptability of violence.

## 3. Key Characteristics and Mechanisms

**Observational Learning and Imitation:** This mechanism, largely derived from Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, is activated when viewers observe successful, attractive, or justified violence.

The individual learns specific aggressive scripts or techniques by watching the model. A critical factor here is the concept of disinhibition; when a character commits a violent act without receiving negative reinforcement, the viewer's normal internal constraints against aggression are temporarily weakened. If the fictional perpetrator is portrayed as a hero, the aggressive action is often positively reinforced within the narrative structure, making the behavior more likely to be adopted or utilized by the viewer in future conflict situations.

**Emotional Desensitization:** Desensitization is a gradual psychological process resulting from repeated exposure to graphic or frequent media violence. Initially, violence elicits physiological arousal and negative emotional responses (e.g., anxiety, fear, distress). Over time, the viewer habituates to this stimulus, leading to a blunting of emotional reactivity. This diminished response translates into decreased empathy for real-life victims of violence and a reduction in the severity with which the individual perceives aggression. Desensitization contributes significantly to the normalization of violence, making aggressive acts seem commonplace and less shocking or morally objectionable.

**Cognitive Priming:** The VVE operates through cognitive priming by increasing the immediate accessibility of aggressive thoughts, attitudes, and behavioral scripts stored in memory. Exposure to violent media activates a network of hostility-related concepts. For a temporary period following exposure, an individual primed with violence is more likely to interpret ambiguous social cues as hostile (hostile attribution bias), to react aggressively to minor provocations, and to recall aggressive solutions to problems. This is a short-term effect, but chronic exposure can maintain an elevated baseline level of aggressive thought accessibility, fundamentally altering cognitive processing.

**Arousal and Excitation Transfer:** Media violence, particularly fast-paced or graphic content, causes physiological arousal (increased heart rate, heightened adrenaline). According to the excitation transfer theory, this residual arousal may linger after the violent content has ended and can be misattributed to subsequent emotional experiences. If the viewer is provoked shortly after viewing violent content, the misattributed residual arousal can intensify their aggressive reaction, leading to a disproportionately angry or hostile response that might not have occurred otherwise.

#### 4. Significance and Impact

The Violence Viewing Effect holds immense significance across several domains, primarily in shaping public policy, media regulation, and developmental psychology. Academically, the VVE provided a unifying framework for decades of research attempting to quantify the influence of mass media on societal behavior, moving the discussion from anecdotal fear to systematic empirical investigation. The findings related to VVE have been instrumental in advocating for and implementing media literacy programs designed to help viewers, especially youth, critically analyze

and contextualize violent content, thereby mitigating some of the effect's potential negative outcomes.

In the realm of public policy, research on the VVE has directly informed the development of media rating systems worldwide. Systems like the Motion Picture Association (MPA) ratings or video game classification boards (e.g., the Entertainment Software Rating Board, ESRB) rely heavily on the principle that restricting or labeling content based on its violent depiction (especially unjustified violence, lack of consequences, or high graphic intensity) can protect vulnerable populations from the most severe forms of the VVE. These policy decisions are driven by the recognized necessity to balance free expression with public health concerns related to aggression and societal desensitization.

Furthermore, the concept has had a profound impact on clinical and developmental psychology. Understanding VVE mechanisms, such as observational learning and cognitive priming, allows therapists and educators to better diagnose and intervene in cases of chronic aggression or antisocial behavior in children and adolescents. Parental guidelines regarding media consumption are often formulated directly from VVE research, emphasizing the importance of co-viewing, discussing media consequences, and limiting exposure to content where violence is glamorized or normalized. The VVE underscores the role of media as a powerful socializing agent that contributes to, though does not solely determine, the moral and behavioral development of the individual.

## 5. Debates and Criticisms

Despite decades of research supporting the existence of the Violence Viewing Effect, the field remains highly contentious, centered primarily on the critical distinction between correlation and causation. The fundamental criticism argues that while numerous studies demonstrate a correlation between heavy media violence exposure and aggressive attitudes or behaviors, this association does not necessarily imply that the viewing *causes* the behavior. Critics often point to the "third variable problem": perhaps both a preference for violent media and aggressive tendencies are caused by a pre-existing factor, such as a genetic predisposition toward low self-control, poor parenting, or environmental instability. If this is the case, media violence is merely an indicator or a reinforcing factor, not the root cause.

Methodological limitations also form a significant basis for criticism. Many early studies relied on laboratory experiments where aggression was measured using proxy behaviors, such as the willingness to deliver harmless bursts of noise to a confederate--a measure critics argue lacks ecological validity and fails to predict real-world violence. Field studies, while providing greater realism, often suffer from difficulties in isolating media exposure from other environmental influences. Furthermore, definitions of "violence" in studies often vary widely, sometimes

encompassing everything from cartoonish slapstick to realistic gore, making comparisons and meta-analyses challenging. The "limited effects" perspective posits that for most individuals, the influence of family, peers, socioeconomic status, and individual personality traits far outweighs the relatively minor contribution of media consumption to overall aggression levels.

A significant debate also exists regarding the magnitude and directionality of the effect. While some studies suggest that the effect size is robust, critics contend that the vast majority of individuals exposed to violent media do not become violent, questioning whether the VVE truly represents a pervasive public health risk or if it only significantly impacts a small, already vulnerable population. Furthermore, the selection hypothesis proposes a reverse causality: aggressive individuals are naturally drawn to, and seek out, violent media (aggressive seeking leads to viewing), rather than the viewing causing the aggression. Contemporary research attempts to resolve this debate using longitudinal studies and sophisticated statistical modeling to explore the complex, cyclical interaction between aggressive dispositions and media consumption over time.

## 6. Related Theoretical Frameworks

The conceptual foundation of the VVE is strengthened by its integration into several larger theoretical frameworks that explain the processing of mass media and the acquisition of social behavior. The most critical framework is the Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), championed by Albert Bandura. SCT provides the foundational explanation for the VVE by detailing how individuals learn not only through direct experience but also through observation. In the context of violence viewing, SCT emphasizes the role of self-efficacy (the belief that one can successfully execute a behavior) and outcome expectancies (the belief that the behavior will yield desirable results). When media portrays violence as effective and rewarding, the viewer's positive outcome expectancies regarding aggression increase, thus facilitating the VVE.

A more comprehensive framework that incorporates many VVE mechanisms is the General Aggression Model (GAM), developed by Craig Anderson and Brad Bushman. GAM posits that aggressive behavior is the result of a complex interaction between situational factors (e.g., exposure to violent media, provocation) and personal factors (e.g., personality traits, aggressive beliefs). According to GAM, media violence acts as a powerful input that influences the individual's internal states (cognition, affect, and arousal) in the short term, and through repeated exposure, contributes to the development of enduring aggressive knowledge structures (scripts, schemas) in the long term. GAM effectively links the short-term effects of priming and arousal with the long-term changes associated with desensitization and normative belief shifts inherent in the VVE.

Finally, Cultivation Theory offers a macro-level explanation for how the VVE impacts societal perception rather than focusing solely on individual behavior. George Gerbner argued that heavy

consumption of television, which consistently depicts a world saturated with violence (the "mean world syndrome"), gradually cultivates a view of reality that is consistent with the televised depiction. While not directly explaining individual aggressive acts, Cultivation Theory explains the VVE's impact on beliefs: viewers become overly fearful, distrustful, and more accepting of harsh punitive measures or high levels of police force in society, believing that such aggression is necessary to navigate a constantly hostile world. This reinforces the VVE's mechanism of justification and normalization.

### Further Reading

[Social Psychology \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Social Cognitive Theory of Mass Communication \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Cognitive Priming \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Cultivation Theory \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Payne Fund Studies \(Wikipedia\)](#)

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