

## Impact of Television News Violence: A Critical Analysis of Sensitization Effects on Mental Well-being of University Students

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### Abstract

Cultivation theory posits that heavy exposure to violent media content can lead to increased aggressive behavior, as well as heightened anxiety and fear regarding personal safety, particularly among young people. This study investigates these effects by focusing on the impact of violent TV news on sensitization, insecurity, mistrust, and fear among Pakistani youth. Adopting a quantitative approach with a cross-sectional research design, data was collected from 518 students (both male and female) across 12 public sector universities in Pakistan. The findings support the tenets of Cultivation Theory, showing that exposure to violent TV news sensitizes youth and cultivates a perception of an unsafe world. Additionally, the study identifies a significant rise in anxiety, depression, fear, mistrust, and insecurity among university students, with female participants exhibiting greater sensitivity to these effects than their male counterparts. These results underscore the critical need for awareness and intervention strategies to mitigate the negative psychological impacts of violent media content on young individuals.

**Keywords:** Television, News, Sensitization, Fear, Anxiety, Mistrust, Advocacy against violence, Well-being

### 1. Introduction

Mass media refers to the technology used to communicate with large groups of people within a short time frame. It serves as a channel of communication that transmits information in various forms to shape public perception. Lopez & Schweitzer (2023) state that mass media significantly influences people's perceptions of both illusion and reality today. It acts as a watchdog, protects the public interest, and creates awareness. However, television, in particular, is the most influential medium of electronic media (Bignell & Woods, 2022). It allows people to see videos, pictures, and hear audio. Television is a source that shares images and messages, considering it a centralized system of storytelling. According to Bignell & Woods (2022), television is a valuable source of information and is often regarded as one of humanity's most significant communication inventions. Television has undeniably played a pivotal role in shaping the modern world's information landscape and influencing public perceptions and behaviors. As one of the most pervasive forms of mass media, television wields immense power to convey narratives, values,

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and messages to a global audience. Within this vast realm of televised content, the portrayal of violence has emerged as a subject of particular concern, sparking debates about its impact on viewers and society at large. Television organizations have to compete with each other and are more concerned with their ratings that's why they show more violent content to engage a high number of people and to generate more ratings and their revenues in the world and Pakistan too. The violence-based news negatively affects the viewer's psychological state and change their opinion about the world. A study conducted in Pakistan states that violence on television makes viewers sensitive to pain, which is suffering by others (Zulfiqar, 2021). Depiction of violence may increase anxiety by making the world seem more hostile and crime-ridden. Anxiety harms functioning through both its primary symptoms e.g., sleep disturbances and concentration difficulties, and development of secondary problems e.g., depressive symptoms (Lee et al., 2023).

Reports of being victimized and witnessing violence were significantly associated with the report of emotional distress and depression. They feel scared or upset due to the violence news. Exposure to news makes them feel sad, angry, and afraid. In short, viewers who frequently viewed violence have psychological distress and emotional instability and likely to suffer from anxiety depression, aggression, and posttraumatic symptoms. Violence portraying in television works as indicators that build a conception of social reality in the mind of viewers, and this cultivation effect has occurred after repeated exposure (Tylka et al., 2023). Students who are bullied and emotionally attacked show high levels of embitterment (Javaid & Mahmood, 2023). Exposure to social media affects students significantly (Ramzan et al., 2023). Sensitization often requires same repeated exposure which can ultimately trigger thoughts, emotional responses like fear, anxiety, behavioral changes, depression and insecurity. All these variables are not direct components of sensitization. These are emotional responses that can be influenced by sensitization processes in certain situations. For instance, if someone experiences repeatedly traumatic events, he may become more sensitive to potential threats, leading to fear, insecurity, anxiety, and depression (Tylka et al., 2023).

## **2. Theoretical framework**

This study examines the relationship between televised violence and its potential to influence individuals, utilizing the theoretical framework of Cultivation Theory from a Pakistani perspective. Researchers conducted surveys in various universities across Pakistan to investigate how television news shapes perceptions of violence, particularly focusing on its impact on people's attitudes and behaviors. According to the prime media construction theory, individuals' perception of reality has the potential to be shaped from their continued exposure to specific types of media content. The idea underlines that because of television news audiences witnessing violence over and over again, they may have augmented trepidation and responsiveness to violence that happens in real life. The correlation between cultivation theory and the heightened response to TV news lies in the theory's core principles: the significant and long lasting deterioration of psyche, identity, attitudes, and emotional states caused by a constant and overwhelming flow of negative content implies that people may feel fear, anxiety, or even depression. Through habitual exposure to media contents, individuals could be influenced in terms of beliefs and perception by the cultivation hypothesis. On the basis of this assumption, when the occurrence of new reports about violence, especially on TV, is a common thing for people, these people can become not sensitive to it and, as a result, become afraid of everything and think that the world is the place for criminals.

When we go into the theory in media studies and consider the idea of sensitization to violence, we are looking at two sides of the same coin. The main issue is the behavioral and attitudinal changes, which shows the connection sensitization and cultivation theory. People that are fed with a diet of violence through news become deafer to issues of confidence, security, and trust. Therefore, such observations provide a reason for the media impact theory that media influence people, and their moods as well as worldview and social perspectives can be affected (Smith, 2022). The theory posits that television functions as a primary storyteller, constructing a symbolic realm that viewers gradually internalize. Consequently, individuals who consume large amounts of time watching television content may come to perceive the world through the lens of the narratives and values consistently presented on the screen. The overarching concern in this study lies in understanding how televised violence fits within the framework of Cultivation Theory. Does prolonged exposure to violent content on television sensitize individuals, making them more attuned to real-world violence and its consequences, or does it desensitize them, leading to a blunting of emotional responses and a distorted understanding of the impact of violence?

### **3. Statement of Problem**

In Pakistani television, violence-based news is displayed usually in every bulletin. Every day through media, we hear and see about target killing, bomb blast, firing, suicide attacks, kidnapping episodes and road traffic accidents. Consequently, hearing of such freighting and traumatic accidents have negative impact on mental health. There is growing evidence that the media violence also engenders intense fear in children and youth which often lasts days, week, months and even years. Many other negative psychological effects are aroused which manipulate a person's automatic physical processes, which generally clear our conscious control. The violence in television news channels in Pakistan causes changing of way of thinking and their perceptions. Khalid et al. (2022) stated that the violence-based news may change the opinion about the world and negatively effects on psychological states of the viewers. Many negative outcomes are observed among viewers which is due to exposure to violence. Violence-based content cause anxiety, fear, mistrust, and other psychological distress and cognitive problems among Pakistani female youth. Under these circumstances, it is of vital importance to explore and to identify what exactly the audience of Pakistan is being exposed to via news media and to analyze how this is affecting perception or opinion. This problem is important to study among youth because youth is a powerful resource, which can either construct or destruct the whole nation (Zia et al., 2017).

### **4. Significance of the Study**

The issue of consequences brought on by violence broadcasted on television news to viewers is hence examined, therefore, this study's significance is just immense. The purpose of this piece is not only to give a full picture of the psychological consequences that people experience after watching violent news, but also to tackle the issue of social exclusion that comes with it. Media company may also gain additional knowledge on the psychological effects of such type of news among adult viewers via the study, which will, in turn, enable them to undertake preventive measures to reduce the negative impacts.

In addition, this study can also aid lawmakers who need to make laws and directives for television news programs. It can contribute reliable findings for the making of laws and directives by the lawmakers in this case. With these laws being quite important, they are acting as a responsible mechanism to securing an ethical reporting environment where the media in general

is of high quality. On the top of that, it will be very important for the parents, who try to decide on possible impact of exposure to violent news on their children, to read this research. They give us an insight into the damaging psychological effects that the press brings about through controversial news depictions, thereby educating people enough to be able to make smart choices when it comes to their media use.

Further, the outcome of this research may have significant enhancement to the present science associated with selected field of study. The exhaustive analysis of a relationship between news representations of violence and young people worldview formation finally could lead us to a deeper understanding of how the media portrayals influence attitudes within society. In turn, I believe it contributes to a more informed approach and discussions involving media that are job oriented to the mental health too.

The significance of this study lies in its empirical validation of Cultivation Theory within the Pakistani context, demonstrating the detrimental effects of violent TV news on youth, including increased anxiety, depression, fear, mistrust, and insecurity. The research highlights the heightened susceptibility of females to these impacts, emphasizing the need for gender-sensitive media literacy and mental health interventions. By providing a critical evidence base, this study informs policymakers, educators, and mental health professionals, enabling them to develop targeted strategies to mitigate the adverse effects of violent media on young individuals and promote a healthier developmental environment.

## **5. Research Objective**

The research objectives of the current study were as follow;

1. To find out how much Pakistani youth's exposure to violence in TV news affects their level of sensitization, sense of insecurity and the emergence of mistrust.
2. To evaluate the effects of exposure to violence in TV news on the basis of gender, with a particular focus on whether fear is more common in women than in men.

## **6. Literature Review**

The literature reviewed here highlights the relationship between sensitization to TV news and cultivation theory. While cultivation theory suggested that long-term exposure can shape viewers' perceptions and attitudes, sensitization emphasizes the immediate impact of news content on awareness and responsiveness. In recent years, the role of television news in shaping our perceptions of the world has come under intense scrutiny. The constant barrage of violent news stories that inundated our screens has raised questions about how this exposure affects our emotions, attitudes, and behavior. In this section, the researcher has explored key studies and research findings to shed light on the subject.

Television violence contributes to fear/passivity and aggressiveness in the adolescents. TV news violence has a distinct potential to produce aggressive behavior among young viewers. Harmful effects of exposure to media violence in America on both children and adults. The study found relationship between viewing television violence including crime shows, violence in drams, movies and video games and aggressive behavior. Children adopt aggression to solve social conflicts. The study also found that viewers are emotionally comfortable with violent content after extensive exposure. Media violence can lead to unrealistic perceptions of how much violence.

occurs in this world and also create fear of becoming a victim of crime. It may also evoke immediate fear responses that transitory and fleeting in nature. These effects have found in both child and adult viewers. Children has violent behavior if exposed to unhealthy behavior and parents are less concerned (Kamran et al., 2023). After watching TV violent content, males in Pakistan experience more violence than females. However, exposure to violence creates anger in both genders and causes depression in females. Research explains that heavy news viewing and frequent exposure to news violence led to increase anxiety, depression, and loss of behavioral and emotional control in viewing. Therefore, news channels should avoid live coverage of bomb blast and other crime events which may be helpful in controlling negative psychological effects of such news. Individuals who watch more violent programs, particularly women who are the heaviest viewers, tend to experience higher levels of depression compared to those who watch less violent content. Additionally, heavy viewers also exhibit symptoms of trauma, which can lead to increased feelings of depression, anger, and stress (Zhao & Zhou, 2020).

In Klinkenberg's study (2015), a connection was established between anxiety, fear, and mass media consumption among individuals. The research suggests that various forms of media, both traditional and social, contribute to the dissemination of fear and anxiety. Consequently, this study concludes that all types of media have the potential to instill feelings of fear, anxiety, and even depression. Moreover, the study also identified a relationship between television viewing habits and stressful life events. However, it's worth mentioning that stressed men tend to watch more television than their relaxed counterparts, a pattern that does not hold true for women. The impact of violent television news on young people's psychology is noteworthy, as it can lead to behavioral changes and heightened sensitivity. Such exposure can make them feel threatened in their daily lives. Additionally, they may experience a sense of insecurity when they are outside of their homes after being exposed to such violent content. Political exposure and speeches of leader over media platforms can persuade for positive or violent behavior (Ramzan et al., 2023). Communication and language skills reduce anxiety of students as well (Javaid et al., 2023).

A study examined the impact of television viewing on individuals, building upon Gerber's earlier findings that heavy television viewers tend to experience anxiety and mistrust, leading to the formation of specific attitudes, perceptions and beliefs. The results indicated a significant correlation between television viewing and the fear of becoming a victim of crime. Additionally, female respondents exhibited higher levels of fear as compared to their male counterparts (Ojala et al., 2021).

Sensationalism is a top priority for news channels in an effort to draw viewers. This leads to a lot of coverage of violent events, including murders, kidnappings, thefts, gender-based violence, and sexual, psychological, and physical abuse, which serves as the background against which violence sensitization takes place. An investigation on the sensitization effects of violent television news revealed the ways in which exposure to violent news might affect people's attitudes, behaviors, and emotional reactions. As indicated by a research article on violence exposure and hostility level in children (Sharcher & Post, 2023), those kids who saw violence in news media were likely to be more aggressive than those who watched non-violent media.

Long-term desensitization, one of it being the news content one witnesses. The study findings were thus the gateway to indicating that those people getting exposed to news on violence for long periods of time had raised levels of anxiety and increased sensitivity to violent events. Displaying of violent sequence on media has been discovered to increase the wells of concern and anxiety, especially when reported in a sensational and distorted manner. Moreover, the research has proven

that the perception of increased violence is mostly because of the assumption that the occurrences are more than it actually is (Butt et al, 2021). Additionally, however, there exists another side of the story that watching violent news can further intensify the aggressive ideas and feelings, not surprisingly, mainly by those who are already possessing aggressive behavioural traits. While it may seem intuitive that televised news about crime would sensitize us, cultivation theory reminds us that it is also possible to acquire a skewed perception of reality alongside becoming more emotional than the rest of the population in the issues of crime. There can be the benefits and the negative consequences. On the one hand, it could increase the level of community participation but at the same time, it may open the door for the understanding of crime. On the other hand, it may also provoke people the way to be afraid and worried, which, at the same time, could be bad for their life quality (Ravid, 2019).

## **7. Hypothesis**

In the light of above literature, following hypothesis have been formulated to meet research objectives.

H1-Exposure to violence in TV news has positive correlation towards sensitization, insecurity and mistrust among university students.

H2-Females has more exposure to news violence and more mistrusted than males.

## **8. Method**

This study employs a quantitative method and correlational research design to explore the sensitization to violent TV news among Pakistani youth aged 20-30 using convenient sampling. The study's sample consists (n=518) young adults (males and females) selected from 12 public sector universities (almost 43 from each university) across Pakistan. However, the total population would consist of all the students enrolled in these public and private sector universities from which the sample was drawn.

### **Research instrument**

Close-ended questionnaire comprising four sections i.e. demographics information, violence exposure, sensitization effects like fear, mistrust, anxiety, depression and insecurity was developed for data collection. After preparing questionnaire, pilot study from (n=100) participants was conducted to check its reliability. The Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient is 0.89, indicating a high level of internal consistency of 42 items. Feedback from the pilot study participants is used to refine the questionnaire for the main study. 5-point Likert scale were used where 1 indicates "Strongly Disagree" and 5 represents "Strongly Agree" (Anxiety by Spielberger et al., 1971; Sensitization by Meyer et al., 2008; Fear, anxiety and insecurity by Gerbner et al., available on George Gerbner Archive (n.d)).

### **Procedure**

Informed consent was taken and study questionnaires were distributed. The data was collected from university students of Pakistan. 12 universities of Pakistan were selected through Higher Education Commission ranking system. Total 567 questionnaires were received back while 700 questionnaires were distributed. Those questionnaires which were not properly filled and had

missing values were rejected. However, 518 responses were considered final with 79.9% response rate. Statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) 23.0 was used to analyze data.

## 9. Results

Demographics provide a comprehensive breakdown of key variables related to the survey's participants. These variables shed light on the composition of the study's sample, including gender, age groups, TV watching habits, and the types of content to which respondents are exposed.

Table1

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N=518)

Variables	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Male	260	50.2
female	258	49.8
Age		
Under 18	45	8.7
18-22	327	63.1
23-26	118	22.8
Above 27	28	5.4
Time spend on T.V		
Less than 1 hour	366	70.7
1-2 hours	125	24.1
3-4 hours	17	3.3
4 or above	10	1.9
Type of content exposed		
Political	305	58.9
Violent	77	14.9
Sports	66	12.7
Fashion	70	13.5

According to the above data, almost 50.2% are males while 49.8% are female respondents. This demonstrates a nearly equal gender distribution in the sample. The above data elaborates that 8.7% respondents fall into the under 18 age group, 63.1% fall under 18-22 age group, 22.8% respondents fall into the 23-26 age group while 5.4% participants are categorized as "Above 27," indicating a minority of older respondents. Almost (70.7%) respondents spend less than 1 hour in watching TV and are considered light users, (24.1%) participants spend 1-2 hours, 3.3% respondents spend 3-4 hours while 1.9% participants fall into the category "4 or above" in

watching tv news. Almost 58.9% respondents are exposed to political content, 14.9 % exposed to "Violent" content, 12.7% watch sports-related content and 13.5%) are exposed to "Fashion" content, representing a notable portion of the sample. Further, Pearson moment correlation was tested to check association of study variables.

Table 2.

Exposure to violence, sensitization, insecurity and fearful

Variables	1	2	3	4
<b>Media violence</b>	1	.860**	.825**	.754**
<b>Sensitization</b>		1-	.907**	.808**
<b>Insecurity</b>		-	1	.891**
<b>Fearful</b>		-	-	1

\*\*p<.01

The result of the current study showed that media violence is positively and highly significantly correlated with sensitization. It confirms that media violence is leading Pakistani youth towards sensitization. Moreover, the media violence is also positively correlated with anxiety. It implicates that a highly significant relation exists between media violence and anxiety. The result further indicates that media violence is making youth insecure. Furthermore, media violence is positively correlated with fearful feelings. The highly significant relationship is identified between media violence, sensitization, insecurity, fear, and responsible for creating fear and anxiety.

To measure the gender difference, independent Samples t-test was applied.

Table 3

*Exposure to violence and mistrust*

Variables	Male M(SD)	Female M(SD)	t	p	CI LL	UL
<b>News Violence</b>	17.92(3.55)	19.24(3.01)	-4.54	.000	-1.88	-.745
<b>Mistrust</b>	122.31(12.33)	128.64(13.28)	-5.62	.000	-8.54	-4.12

Note: M=Mean, SD=Standard Deviation, p< 0.001, CI=Confidence Interval, LL=Lower limit, UL=Upper limit

Table 3 shows summary of independent sample t-test which reveals that the difference between male and female scores on News Violence is -4.54, which is highly statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). This suggests that there is a significant difference in how male and female students perceive or react to violence depicted in TV news. However, t-value on mistrust was -5.62, which is highly statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). This suggests that there is a significant difference in mistrust levels between male and female students. Result revealed that there is highly significant difference between male and female regarding viewership of news violence and level of mistrust and sensitization. Female are found to be more frequent viewers of news violence and more mistrusted.



The first hypothesis of the study was exposure to violence in TV news leads Pakistani youth towards sensitization. The results of this study conclude that there is a significant correlation between sensitization and exposure to violent TV news. The results, as illustrated in Table 2, confirm the validity of H1.

## 10. Discussion

These findings are consistent with the study's findings of Bhutta et al. (2023) which suggests that continuous exposure to violent news content may sensitize Pakistani youth to the issues related to the violence, subsequently impacting their emotional states. The viewers become highly sensitive when exposed to violence in TV news, leading to feelings of depression and fear. The findings further explain that females are highly sensitive after exposure to violent news stories as compared to males.

Further this hypothesis (exposure to violence makes Pakistani youth insecure) was also corroborated, as the findings indicate that both males and females feel insecure after consuming violent news content on TV (see Table 2). These results are also aligned study which states that exposure to violent news content in media can lead to increased feelings of insecurity and it can lead to distress and anxiety. However, research has shown that the socioeconomic context and family support systems play a significant role in mitigating or exacerbating feelings of insecurity among Pakistani youth exposed to violence (Ahmed, 2023). The data extracted from the study establish a statistically significant connection between exposure to violence and feelings of insecurity. There is association between media violence news exposure and increased perceptions of personal vulnerability among young individuals.

Exposure to violence depicted in News cause mistrust others exposure to violence depicted in news cause mistrust others which is approved by the study's results (see Table 2). The findings explore that youth do not trust others after watching violent TV news. This concept is also in line with which depict that portrayal of violence in television is readily accessible to young audiences, who often consume it without effective guidance or context. Such exposure creates feelings of mistrust in others. A study by Smith et al. (2022) found that individuals who consume a steady diet of media violence, they perceive the world as untrustworthy place.

Exposure to violence makes females more fearful than males which is supported by the results of present study. The results show that there is significant correlation (see Table 2) between violent tv news content and fearful feelings among both males and females. This notion is also consistent with previous studies which explain that after watching violent content on TV and in real life, can evoke fear and anxiety in individuals. People tend to experience feelings of fear, sadness, anger, and anxiety when confronted with violent news reports (Nasreen & Abbas, 2023). Hence, females are more likely to be heavy viewers than males and tend to experience greater fear than males, the findings of this present study concluded. A study has explored that gender differences in responses to media violence, revealing that female youth tend to exhibit higher levels of fearfulness in response to violent content in TV news (Smith, 2022). This is aligned with the cultivation theory's prediction that media can influence specific demographic groups differently.

However, the results of all the hypothesis align with cultivation theory's assertion that media exposure can shape one's perception of social reality. Media induced fear of crime which distort one's perception of the real world. Cultivation theory suggests that media content, particularly television news, can mold individuals' perceptions of reality, causing them to believe that the world is more dangerous, violent, and negative than it actually is. "Mean world syndrome"

which is a term frequently used are often the unwanted consequences of heavy viewing with fear, anxiety, and insecurity being the end product. Hence, this may result in creating a detachment between their viewing habits and self-perception, as displayed in Table 2 where more than 70.7% of respondents considered themselves light users. Similarly, on the understanding that media violence may promote in young individuals' feelings of insecurity and low trust in people which causes low self-confidence. Nevertheless, further intellectual basis of the fact that the portrayal of violence on television news significantly contributes to the way the viewers frame their cultural surroundings (Zhou et al., 2021).

## **11. Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study highlights the significant impact of televised violence on the psychological well-being of Pakistani youth. It reveals strong correlations between exposure to violent TV news and increased levels of sensitization, insecurity, mistrust, and fear. These findings align with the core principles of Cultivation Theory, which suggest that prolonged television viewing can shape individuals' perceptions and attitudes, leading to intensified emotional responses and a distorted worldview.

The results indicate that both male and female youth experience sensitivity and emotional disturbance after watching violent news, with females showing greater sensitivity and fear than males. This observation is consistent with existing research that highlights the differential impact of media violence on various demographic groups. Additionally, the study supports the notion that violent news exposure fosters feelings of insecurity and mistrust, corroborating prior literature linking media violence to negative psychological outcomes.

## **12. Limitations and Recommendations**

There are few limitations of the study like the researchers wanted to conduct research on multiple mediums like social media and others but due to shortage of time and budgetary issues, it was hard to do so. It was also planned to combine mix method for more reliable results but could not do so. Future researchers can look on the matter and expand research in this area.

At national level, government should introduce censorship so such content (violent content) can be controlled because presentation of such content so openly is causing fear and insecurities. The role of parents and teachers is also important as they should create friendly environment for youth so they can express their feelings and emotions without any hesitation. Parents should also set limits on the amount of time they spend on TV. Parents should also be vigilant about peer and provide guidance to their children how to maintain such friendship and avoid aggressive behaviours. However, media literacy is also very important in order to eliminate crimes, fear, anxiety and depression from society. Media literacy is crucial for education people. Such initiatives can contribute significantly to the overall well-being and mental health of the population.

### ***Conflict of Interest:***

Authors have no conflict of interest.

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