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Abstract

This study investigated the relationship between television programme preference and perception of crime among youths in tertiary institutions in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. In carrying out this study, three specific objectives and one null hypothesis were postulated. The descriptive survey method was adopted because of its advantage of collecting and analyzing data of a small number of population and generalizing it to the entire population. Also, the questionnaire was used in collecting data from a sample of 390 students in five tertiary institutions in Port Harcourt. A random sample drawn from 28,900 students was determined through a mathematical and representative process using the Yard’s formula. Data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistics. While the Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient (PPMC) analysis was used to test the null hypothesis postulated for the study. The study reveals that violent television programmes disinhibits, and toughens youths who watch such television programmes; programme content having guns was rated most violent by respondents; youths have higher preference for movies/films to any other television programme type. The study further revealed that there is a significant relationship between television programme preference and the perception of crime among students in tertiary institutions. It was recommended among others that the use of guns and live ammunition on television shows should be discouraged by television producers; producers of television programmes should be more creative in showing perpetrators of violent acts being punished and should be able to present alternatives to use of violence in solving problems; Censor Board should have zero tolerance for violent television programmes. It must be understood that the most harmful violent films and movies are not necessarily the bloodiest but are those in which the aggressive is rewarded for violence and in which aggression is portrayed as justified; lastly, regular enlightenment programmes and seminars should be organized by the authorities of these tertiary institutions to educate and enlighten these youths on the dangers of crime and criminal behaviours.

1. Introduction

The mass media are important institutions in society. This is because, for society to exist, certain communication needs must be met. These needs existed from the cradle of human society long before the advent of modern mass communication media-print and electronic (Dominick, 1993, p.33). The mass media as they are generally called, have significant basic function in society – to inform, educate and entertain. Among the early scholars who have seriously considered the functions and roles of mass media in society were Harold Laswell and Charles Wright.

Laswell (1948/1960), scholar of mass communication noted three functions of mass media; surveillance of the environment, the transmission of the social heritage from one generation to the next and correlation of parts of society in responding to the environment. To these functions Wright (1959) adds a fourth -entertainment. In addition to functions, the media may also have dysfunctions; consequences that are undesirable for the society or its members (Severin and Tankard, 2001, p.321). The dysfunctional aspects of the media include; the promotion of crime through television violence, promotion of gender inequality, sex and pornography, drugs and alcoholism. It could be inferred from media dysfunctions that television viewers apart from the positive functions or satisfactions television offers through its programmes, could engage television programmes for the dysfunctional satisfaction.

It is obvious that viewers of mass communication messages are emotionally, psychologically, culturally and intellectually different. These differences affect the preference they give to one television programme against another, and their preference determines the extent of exposure they give to television programme; how they perceive such message, retain and recall them when the need arises. In his contribution to Individual Differences Perspective of the Media, Folarin (1998, p.59) says that from exposition and laboratory experiments on behaviourism, classical conditioning, learning differences and attitude formation in the 1950s and early 1960s, it became increasingly clear that individuals differ in their personal psychological organizations, just as studies in the natural sciences had also revealed differential biological endowments. It was discovered that attitude, values and beliefs were learnt in the contest of experience and this resulted in differences in cognition and perception.
The principle of selective attention and perception Folarin (1998, p.59) holds that people pay attention to media messages and interpret them in line with their interests, belief, values and experiences. These determine the preferences for a particular television programme to another. And television programme preference to a large extent determines how they see or perceive issues in society generally including crime. This is true since studies have shown that viewers especially children and youths often imitate what they watch or see on a social medium as television and then go out and reproduce them (Dosunmu, 2007, Gunter, 2002, and Onyekosor, 2014).

The study of perception according to Folarin (1998, p.64) actually led to the discovery of selectivity process. Each of us tends to perceive and then decode mass communication messages in the light of our previous experiences and current dispositions – our needs, moods and memories. The language we speak and words we use also tend to circumscribe our perception. Defleur and Ball-Rokeach recall how scientists for a long time considered the atom indivisible because the Greek world “atom” means “indivisible”. They also recall how malaria remained uncontrollable for a long time because doctors believe it was caused by the “bad air” (from Italian “mala aria”) of the tropics.

The way people perceive crime and consequences of crime often depends on how crime and consequences of crime are presented or portrayed in the media given the fact that the mass media (especially television) are agents of socialization and cognition. A study that examined cable television as well as the major networks found that very few violent programmes show long-term negative consequences of violence, that most violent scenes show the violent perpetrators unpunished and that violent interactions show no pains or long-term negative consequences of the violence (National Television Violence Study, 1996). The researchers recommended that producers be more creative in showing more violent acts being punished, more negative consequences of violent acts, and more alternatives to the use of violence in solving problems.

Crime and criminal behaviours are regard as bad and evil in societies, criminals are treated as antisocial across cultures of human race. But this is not what the culture of television teaches the youths in their programmes; perpetrators are rewarded for crime and violent are presented as heroes who become role models to our youths and children.

That criminal activities like cultism, robbery, rape, violent cult clashes and other antisocial behaviours exist among youths in tertiary institutions in Port Harcourt, Nigeria is not in doubt (Onyekosor, 2014, Azuatalam and Olaniyi, 2009). What is more worrisome is that despite all forms of regulations and punitive measures put in place by the authorities of these tertiary institutions and punishments spelt out by the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria against crime and its related offences, criminal activities still persist in these institutions.

Disinhibition hypothesis (Severin and Tankard (2001, p.283) suggest that exposure to television violence lowers people inhibitions about crime and violence. By so doing television violence and other criminal activities portrayed on television might be teaching a general norm that violence is an acceptable way of life. This hypothesis also suggests that violence on television de-sensitizes and toughens the viewers towards crime.

In a study on disinhibition carried out much earlier by Walters and Llewellyn-Thomas (1963), it was found that subjects who saw a violent film segment (a knife fight scene) were more likely to increase the levels of electric shock they would give another person than subjects who saw a minimum non-violent film segment (adolescents involved in craft). This finding supports the disinhibition hypothesis since the type of aggression engaged in, was not the same as that portrayed in the film.

A recent study on this group of students by Onyekosor (2014) shows a correlation between television violence and propensity for violent behaviour among youths in tertiary institutions in Port Harcourt. Based on that research report, could the persistence and unabated violence and criminal tendencies among youths in these tertiary institutions be connected to disinhibition arising from the dysfunctional effects of television violence on these youths?

This research effort therefore is a follow-up study which aims at investigating the relationship between television programme preference and the perception of crime among these youths. The question then is: “does the choice of television programme preferred by these youths in tertiary institutions in any way affect their perception of crime as something good and gratifying? This is the focus of this study.

2. Purpose of the Study
The specific purpose of this study is to:
1. Determine television programme preference among youths in tertiary institutions in Port Harcourt, Nigeria;
2. Determine the gratification sought by youths through viewing violent television programmes;
3. To identify content of Nigerian Television Programme that are violent in nature.

3. Research Hypothesis
This research hypothesis was postulated for the study:
5. Theoretical Framework

Two hypotheses are imperative to this study - the Uses and Gratification Approach and the Disinhibition Hypothesis. The uses and gratification approach (Katz, 1959) was first described in an article by Elihu Katz, in which he was reacting to a claim by Bernard Berelson (1959) that the field of communication research appears to be dead. Katz argued that the field that was dying was the study of mass communication as “All-powerful” derived from “Bullet or Hypodermic Needle” Theory (Severin and Tankard, 2001, p.293). He pointed out that most communication research up to that time had been aimed at investigating the question “what do media do to people”? He suggested that the field might save itself by turning to the question “what do people do with the media”?

Rubin (1994) has argued that audience activities – the deliberate choice by users of media content in order to satisfy their needs is the core concept of uses and gratification approach. This approach therefore involves a shift of focus from the purposes of the communicator to the purposes of the receiver. It attempts to determine what functions mass communication is serving for audience members (Severin and Tankard, 2001, p.293). Foliarm (1998, p.65) while explaining uses and gratification approach, says that the theory perceives the recipient as actually influencing the effect process, since he selectively chooses, attends to, perceives and retains the media messages on the basis of his/her needs, beliefs etc. The focus was thus shifted from media production and transmission functions to media consumption function. Instead of asking “what kinds of effect occur under what conditions? The question became: “who uses which content, from which media, under which conditions and for what reasons”?

According to Windahl (1981), a primary difference between the traditional effects approach and the uses and gratification approach is that a media effects researcher usually examines mass communication from the perspective of the communicator, while the uses and gratifications research uses the audience members as a point of departure. The uses and gratification literature has provided several ways of classifying audience needs and gratifications. Some have spoken of immediate and deterred gratifications (Schramm, Lyle and Parker, 1961). Others have called them informational - educational and fantasist - escapist, entertainment (Weiss, 1971).

McQuil, Blumler and Brown (1972), based on their research in England, suggested the following categories:

1. Diversion – escape from routine and problems, emotional release.
2. Personal relationship – Social utility of information in conversations, substitute of the media for companionship.
3. Personal identity or individual psychology, value reinforcement or reassurance; self-understanding; reality exploration and so on.
4. Surveillance – information about things that might affect one or will help one do or accomplish something.

Ho: There is no relationship between television programme preference and the perception of crime among youths in tertiary institutions in Port Harcourt.

4. Contextual Factors that Increase Attention to Television Violence and Crime

There are contextual factors that increase attention of television viewers to television violence. These contextual factors include:

- Attractiveness of the perpetrator: Attractive perpetrators are more likely to be attractive to and identified with than unattractive perpetrators; whether the character is portrayed as a “good guy” or “bad” within the plot (Bandura, 1986). Studies show that viewers are more likely to act aggressively after exposure to characters with whom they identify. Therefore, attractive perpetrators are more likely to be imitated than unattractive ones.

- Also important is the type of weapon used to enact the violence (Loftus, Loftus and Messer, 1987). Viewers are more likely to be attractive to guns than to the neutral objects. Exposure to portrayals involving guns also elicits aggressive thoughts, thereby predisposing an individual to aggression and crime.

- The realism of the portrayal is also likely to affect attention. When compared to fantastic description, realistic portrayal may be perceived as more salient or functionally relevant to the viewer.

- The extensiveness of the violence may also facilitate and heighten retention. Repeated exposure to violent television fare functions as a form of cognitive rehearsal, thereby strengthening and reinforcing aggressive scripts stored in the memory. Indeed studies show that heavy viewing of television violence can have a significant impact on learning aggression (Huesmann, Eron, Berkowitz and Chaffee, 1992).

- Again, research reveals that rewards and punishments can also have significant impact on youths’ aggressive behaviour. This means that exposure to rewarded violence or criminal act that is not punished increases the probability of aggression, whereas, viewing scenes where violence is punished decreases such risks (Lando & Donnerstein, 1978). Finally, analyses of over 200 studies revealed that television violence has a stronger effect on aggression when it is depicted as justified or socially sanctioned behaviour (Perry, 2002).
Film scholars have begun to use an active audience approach to help us understand the viewing of extremely violent motion pictures. Why do people watch such films as “Commando”, “Natural Born Killers”, “Portrait of a Serial Killer”, “Bad Lieutenant”, “I Spit On Your Grave” and so on? What kinds of active cognitive processing strategies might they use to make the violence more tolerable? Hill (1997) studied focus groups of viewers of brutal films and found that they responded with portfolio of interpretations. Factors within the portfolio include conceptualization of fictional violence as entertaining, anticipation of upcoming violence and readiness to choose methods of self-censorship, and establishing individual thresholds for acceptable violence.

Disinhibition hypothesis Severin and Tankard (2001, p.283) suggests that television violence, lowers peoples inhibitions about behaving aggressively towards other people. This means that television violence and other criminal activities portrayed in television programmes might be teaching a general norm that violence is an acceptable way of life. This hypothesis also suggests that television violence desensitizes and toughens people; it believes that regular exposure to crime and violent behaviours on television tends to reduce the viewers ability to think, act properly or consciously. By so doing, viewers who are regularly exposed to violent shows on television do not follow the social rules about what or where to say or do something. Disinhibited people may show lack of concern or pity on such victims as rape, accident or war.

Disinhibited people could see someone dying or drowning and turns his eyes away, because they don’t consciously feel for others in trouble or see death as a serious thing. Disinhibited people may therefore be assumed to be rude, mannerless, heartless, and wicked. It is a state of reduced control over one’s behaviours, impulses, attention and emotions. Disinhibition is the opposite of inhibition, which is a state of control over one’s responses.

The uses and gratification and disinhibition hypotheses were adopted for this study to provide a framework to understand why youths prefer certain television programmes, what needs such programmes satisfy, and the perception of these youths who watch such programmes towards crime and criminal behaviour.

6. Research Method
6.1 Procedure
This study used the descriptive survey method. Wimmer and Dominick (2003) explains that a descriptive survey attempts to picture or document current conditions or attitudes that is, to describe what exists at the moment. Survey also involves the collection and analysis of data collected from a small number of the population and generalizing it to the entire population.

The population of this study comprises all undergraduate students in tertiary institutions in Port Harcourt who are between the age sixteen and thirty years. Students in this age bracket made up the youths in this study.

The total number of students’ population in five tertiary institutions in Port Harcourt was 28,000. The sample of this population was derived through a mathematical, but representative process using the Yard’s formula (Avwokeni, 2007, p.196), the formula was applied as follows:

\[ n = \frac{N}{1 + N(\ell)^2} \]

Where: 
- \( n \) = sample size
- \( N \) = population
- \( \ell \) = level of significance

Through the application of Yard’s formula, a sample size of 395 students respondents was derived mathematically as follows:

\[ n = \frac{28,900}{1 + 28900(0.0025)} = \frac{28,900}{1 + 28900(0.0025)} = \frac{28,900}{1 + 28900(0.0025)^2} \]
Through stratified sampling, the researcher determined the number of students that served as respondents in each institution. This was done in proportion to the number of students in each institution. For example:

\[
\frac{\text{Number of students in school}}{\text{Total number of population}} \times \text{total sample}
\]

Total number of students population = 28,900
Sample of population = 395

To select respondents in each institution, a department was selected from each faculty. This was done alphabetically and randomly. Through this process, department whose alphabetical order came first in the faculty was selected as a representative of that faculty. The total number of sample in each institution was divided accordingly by the number of selected departments. These respondents in each department were administered with the copies of questionnaire without bias to gender or level. The questionnaire were shared proportionally among the institution as follows: 167, 114, 74, 21, and 19 respectively totaling 395.

The research instrument of questionnaire was applied. The questionnaire was divided into two sections “A” and “B”. Section A sought information about the respondents personal data, while section B sought information about the matter being investigated. Each respondent was then expected to indicate the degree of his/her agreement or disagreement with the question. The choice of the questionnaire was based on its suitability in gathering information from a population of students in tertiary institutions. Before the administration of the questionnaire, items in the research instrument were scrutinized through a validity test to ensure that they matched the research question and elicit data for testing the key variables in the study. Also in order to obtain the reliability of the research instrument, 30 copies of the research instrument were administered to a group of 30 students who had all qualities as those in the study, but were from a different institution within the city that was not used in the study. the Cronbach’s Alpha Coefficient was used in determining the reliability which was found to be 0.78.

A total of 395 copies of questionnaire were distributed to students in selected departments that represented the faculties in these institutions. Students seated in class were given numbers before the administration of questionnaire. Student given number 1 was used as the starting point, followed by student with number 2 in that order to the last number of respondent. Respondents answered the questions and then returned questionnaires to the researcher and his assistants.

Data obtained using questionnaire were analyzed using the descriptive statistics. While the Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient (PPMC) analysis was used to test the hypothesis postulated for this study. A total of 390 copies of the questionnaire returned were found to be usable for analysis.

7. **Analysis of Data**

Table 1 shows the responses of the subjects on youths’ television programme preference. As shown in table 1, 47% of the youths preferred movies/films, 21% sports, 22% news, 9% documentary, while 1% preferred other programmes. This implies that youths prefer movies/films most, followed by news, sports, documentary, then others.

Table 2 summarizes the responses on the gratifications sought by youths through viewing violent TV programmes. As shown in table 2, 59% of the respondents’ gratification was vicarious violence, 19% caution, 9% entertainment, 7% bravery while 6% were on others.

Table 3 shows the responses of subjects on the television programme content considered violent in nature. 21%, 19%, 17%, 14%, 13%, 10% and 6% of the respondents responded yes for gun, ritual killing, robbery, kidnapping, fighting, death and quarrelling respectively. This implies that programmes content having guns was considered most violent, followed by ritual killing, robbery, kidnapping, fighting and death. Quarrelling was considered the least violent in a television programme.
Table 4 give a summary of analysis of relationship between television programme preference and perception of crime among youths. As shown in table 4, the calculated r-value 0.47 is greater than the critical r-value 0.195. Hence, the null hypothesis was rejected. This implies that there exists a significant relationship between television programme preference and perception of crime among youths.

8. Discussion of Findings

8.1 What Television programmes do these youths prefer?

The findings reveals that youths prefer movies most, followed by news, sports, and documentaries, then others. This preference could be attributed to youth’s passion for adventure, fantasy and action-packed activities which could be as a result of their hormonal make up which stimulates them towards action, which they enjoy in movies. This is in line with Centrewall (1992) who states that youths and children are more vulnerable to television violence since they are more adventurous and heavy imitators of what they see on a social medium as television. The principle of selection (Folarin, 1998, p.59) holds that people pay attention to television messages and interpret them in line with individual interests, beliefs, values and experiences. These of course determine the preference of one particular programme to another.
8.2 Research Question Two

What gratification do youths derive from watching violent programmes on television:

Respondents’ responses to the question show that youths watch violent television programme for different satisfactions or benefits. Responses obtained from the respondents as gratifications sought by youths were classified into five categories: vicarious violence, caution, entertainment, bravery and others.

Wimmer and Dominick (2003) commenting on uses and gratification approach explained that audiences members have certain needs or drives that are satisfied by using media sources. They further classified audience gratifications into five major categories; information, cognition, social, prestige, and tool for daily living. This researcher however, classified gratification sought by respondents in this study into five categories.

Data in table 2, show that 59% of the respondents’ gratifications was on vicarious violence, 19% on caution, 9% on entertainment, 7% on bravery, while 6% were on others. This means that youths who watch violent programmes on television do so with the purpose of learning criminal acts. In order words, youths who watch violence on television see television as a training camp or as an instructor for violent act. The findings are corroborated by Centrewall (1992), Onyekosor, (2014) which state that violence on television does lead to aggressive behaviour by children and youths who watch them. It also goes further to say that those who watch vicarious violent television shows often go out and reproduce them. Dominick (2002) also states that there are factors guiding preference and exposure of youths to violent television programmes such as; diversion and relaxation, guidance and advice, social contact, value reinforcement, emotional release, identity formation and confirmation, cognition, lifestyle expression, security, sexual arousal, filling time, violence and aggression. However, vicarious violence was rated highest among other gratification sought by youths in this study.

8.3 Research Question Three

What are the content of television programmes that may be considered violent in nature

Data in table 3, shows that quarrelling in television programmes was considered least violent by the respondents. Table 3, also shows that programme content having guns was rated as most violent. The result is in agreement with the opinion of Loftus, Loftus and Messo (1987) that viewers are more likely to be attracted to guns than to the neutral objects. Exposure to the portrayals involving guns can also elicit aggressive thoughts thereby predisposing an individual to aggression. Atkin (1982) also noted that the realism of portrayal of guns in a television programme would generate more attention if handled or perpetrated by attractive character. This is because attractive characters are likely to be attracted to viewers especially youths who easily adopt them as role models than unattractive characters.

8.4 Ho₁: There is no relationship between television programme preference and the perception of crime among youths.

It was found from table 4 (hypothesis one) that their viewing of crime as being acceptable was statistically significant. This is because the calculated r-value 0.47 is greater than the critical r-value 0.197 hence the null hypothesis was rejected. This implies that television violence desensitizes, toughens and hardens the youths to the extent that they no longer have fear for violence. This corroborates the opinion of Huesmann (2008) that exposure to violence on television increases the chances that someday, a child will behave more violently than he otherwise would. In his words: “but just as every cigarette increases the chances that someday a smoker will get lung cancer, every exposure to violence increases the chances that someday a child (youth) will behave more violently than he otherwise would”.

The findings of the study rightly supports the disinhibition hypothesis (Severin and Tankard (2001, p.283) which suggests that television violence lowers peoples inhibitions about behaving aggressively towards other people. Disinhibition is the opposite of inhibition which is a state of control over one’s responses. By this hypothesis, television violence and other criminal activities portrayed in television programmes might be teaching a general norm that violence is an acceptable way of life. This hypothesis also suggests that television violence tends to reduce the viewers ability to think properly and rationally. By so doing, disinhibited persons often do not follow the social rules about what to where to do something. Disinhibition is a state of reduced control over one’s behaviour, impulses, attention and emotions. Disinhibited persons could see someone dying or drowning and turns his eyes away because they no longer feel like every other human beings. They are deconscienitized, a complete state where they are no longer guided by natural conscience. At this point, disinhibited persons may be assumed to be rude, mannerless, heartless, wicked or lacking self control. The findings of this study therefore show that the preference of violent television programme and the perception of crime by youths as something good and gratifying is significantly positive.
9. Summary of Findings
The study was conducted to investigate the relationship between television programme preference and the perception of crime among youths in tertiary institutions in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. This was a follow-up study to an earlier study on these same students (Onyekosor, 2014, p. 50-55). This study was guided by three specific objectives, three research questions and one hypothesis. Using the survey method with questionnaire as instrument for data collection, the following finding emerged:

i) programme content having guns was rated most violent;  
ii) Quarrelling in television programmes was considered least violent;  
iii) Youths prefer movies to other television programme types such as sports, news, documentary and others;  
iv) Youths who watch violent television programmes tend to see crime as something good and gratifying;  
v) Most youths who watch violent television programmes often learn how to commit violent crime.

10. Conclusion
The study clearly shows that there is a significant relationship between television programme preference and the perception of crime among youths in tertiary institutions as the null hypothesis tested was rejected signifying a positive relationship. The study findings support the views of some scholars as Certrewall (1992), Ehindaro (2010), Dosunmu (2007), Onyekosor (2014) and many others that exposure to mediated violence on television disinhibits youths viewers and to a large extent encourages crime among youths.

11. Recommendations
Based on the findings and conclusion of this study, the following recommendations are made:

i) Television programme producers should consider the use of quarreling (vulgar abuse and harmless physical contact) as a better way of expressing anger, or setting disputes in their television productions.  
ii) The use of guns and live ammunition on television programmes should be discouraged by producers.  
iii) Since this studies and scores before it have shown that violent television programmes have negative influence on the youths in tertiary institutions, regular enlightenment programmes and seminars should be organized by authorities of tertiary institutions to educate and enlighten these youths on the dangers of exposure to television violence.  
v) Producers of television programmes should be more creative in showing perpetrators of violent and criminal acts being punished and should be able to present alternatives to the use of violence in solving problems.  
v) Adequate disciplinary actions should be taken against criminal behaviours within the tertiary institutions which may include expulsion, rustication or prosecution depending on the severity of the violent act. This will make it clear that violence and crime have unattractive rewards.  
vi) Lastly, Censor Board should have zero tolerance for violent programmes. It must be understood that the most harmful violent films and movies are not necessarily the bloodiest, but are those in which the aggressive is rewarded for violence and in which aggression is portrayed as justified.

12. References


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