

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MEDIA CONSUMPTION AND FEAR OF CRIME: A COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW

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Abstract

This review comprehensively analyses the relationship between media consumption and fear of crime. Most reviewed studies indicate a positive correlation between media consumption and fear of crime, which can be attributed to the media's tendency to focus on sensationalised and dramatic crimes and the media's effect on individuals' perceptions of reality. However, several studies have found a negative correlation, possibly explained by desensitisation, and heightened awareness among media consumers. Media literacy programmes and responsible reporting are critical to mitigate the public's fear of crime. By promoting media literacy, individuals can better understand the prevalence of crime and recognise the sensationalised nature of media coverage of crime. Media organisations must report crime-related news accurately and objectively, without exaggerating events, to promote a less distorted view of crime in society. The systematic approach employed in this review and the specific search strategy provides a comprehensive and trustworthy overview of the existing research on the relationship between media consumption and fear of crime, despite the limitations of the search strategy. Additional research is needed to understand better the underlying mechanisms and contextual factors that can influence the relationship. Nonetheless, this analysis offers valuable insights into the effect of media consumption on public perceptions of crime and the resulting implications for public safety. Ultimately, media organisations and individuals must take a responsible approach to consume and reporting crime-related news to promote a more accurate and less distorted view of crime in society.

Keywords: media consumption, fear of crime, media literacy, responsible reporting, sensationalism, desensitization, awareness, public safety.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a growing concern regarding the influence of media consumption on people's perceptions of the level of danger in their communities. The news media, in particular, frequently features sensationalised stories about crime, violence, and other negative events, increasing the general public's fear and insecurity (Jackson, 2018; Surette, 2016). This fear of criminal activity can result in avoiding specific places or activities, altering behaviour, and even supporting more stringent criminal justice policies (Jackson, 2018).

Numerous criminology, media studies, and psychology studies have examined the relationship between media exposure and feelings of unease regarding personal safety.

One of the most influential theoretical frameworks in this field is the cultivation theory, which posits that media content can shape our perceptions of reality, including crime and safety (Gerbner et al., 1994). According to this theory, people who consume a great deal of media may develop an exaggerated perception of the frequency of crime and violence in society, as well as an impression that the world is a more dangerous place than it is.

However, empirical evidence regarding the relationship between media consumption and fear of crime is inconsistent. Some studies (such as Babiak and Hagan, 2017; Sacco & Kennedy, 2013) have found a positive correlation between exposure to crime-related media content and fear of crime, whereas other studies have found either no

relationship or a negative correlation between the two variables (e.g., Chadee & Ditton, 2003; Hale, 1996). Variations in research procedures, sample characteristics, and types of content presented in the media may account for these discrepancies (Dowler, 2003).

It is essential to thoroughly understand the dynamics underlying the relationship between exposure to various forms of media and people's perceptions of danger and safety, as these perceptions can be influenced by media exposure. This article aims to provide a comprehensive review of prior research on the topic and present new empirical evidence on the relationship between media exposure and anxiety regarding the possibility of becoming a victim of crime. By doing so, the article hopes to shed light on the mechanisms underlying this relationship and identify potential strategies for reducing the public's fear of crime.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Several decades of criminology and media studies have focused on the relationship between media consumption and fear of crime. Various theoretical frameworks, including cultivation theory, social learning theory, and the mean world syndrome, have been proposed to explain this relationship. These theoretical frameworks and their implications for understanding the relationship between media consumption and fear of crime will be discussed in this section.

In the 1960s, George Gerbner and colleagues first proposed the cultivation theory, suggesting that exposure to media content can shape our perceptions of reality, including crime and safety. According to this theory, heavy exposure to media content that depicts crime and violence as common and threatening can cause individuals to overestimate the prevalence of crime in society and develop a greater fear of crime (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980). Cultivation theory posits that these perceptions are formed over time, as individuals are repeatedly exposed to messages about crime

and violence in the media, and that they are especially influential for individuals who are heavy media users or have limited real-life experiences with crime (Shrum, Wyer, & O'Guinn, 1998).

The relationship between media consumption and fear of crime has been largely supported by empirical evidence. Even after controlling for other relevant variables, such as demographic characteristics and prior victimisation experiences, individuals who consume more crime-related media content tend to have higher levels of fear of crime, according to studies (Chiricos, Eschholz, & Gertz, 1997; Gerbner et al., 1980; Hale, 1996). Furthermore, research has demonstrated that the relationship between media consumption and fear of crime is particularly strong for individuals who perceive themselves to be at a greater risk of victimisation, suggesting that media messages about crime may have a disproportionate effect on those who feel vulnerable or powerless (Chiricos et al., 1997; Skogan & Maxfield, 1981).

Social learning theory, another framework applied to the relationship between media consumption and fear of crime, posits that people learn from their observations of others and the consequences of their behaviours (Bandura, 1977). According to this theory, exposure to media content that depicts crime as a viable means of achieving goals and evading punishment can lead individuals to perceive crime as rational and acceptable behaviour and to develop a greater fear of crime (Surette, 2016). Social learning theory posits that these perceptions are formed through observational learning, in which individuals observe others committing crimes and receiving rewards or punishments, and reinforcement learning, in which individuals receive rewards or punishments for their criminal behaviours (Bandura, 1977).

For social learning theory, empirical evidence regarding the relationship between media consumption and fear of crime has been mixed. While some studies have found a positive correlation between exposure to crime-related media content and perceptions of

criminal behaviour as rational and acceptable (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963; Phillips, 1983), others have found no relationship or even a negative one (Chiricos et al., 1997; Surette, 2016). This suggests that, although social learning theory may help explain some aspects of the relationship between media consumption and fear of crime, other and more influential theoretical frameworks exist.

The mean world syndrome, proposed by Gerbner and colleagues as an extension of cultivation theory, suggests that exposure to media content can shape our perceptions of the world as a dangerous and threatening place, resulting in an increased sense of anxiety and fear (Gerbner et al., 1980). According to this theory, individuals who live in relatively safe communities can develop a sense of insecurity and vulnerability if they are frequently exposed to media portraying crime and violence as prevalent and unpredictable. According to the mean world syndrome, this sense of insecurity can be especially potent for heavy media consumers or who have limited experiences with crime and violence in the real world (Shrum et al., 1998).

The empirical evidence regarding the mean world syndrome has supported cultivation theory substantially. Even after controlling for other relevant factors, studies show that individuals who consume more crime-related media content tend to have a more pessimistic view of the world and higher levels of anxiety and fear (Chiricos et al., 1997; Gerbner et al., 1980; Hale, 1996). In addition, research has demonstrated that the relationship between media consumption and fear is not limited to crime-related media content; exposure to news and other media content that emphasises negative and threatening events can also contribute to the mean world syndrome (Shrum et al., 1998).

Three theoretical frameworks have been proposed to explain the relationship between media consumption and fear of crime: the cultivation theory, the social learning theory, and the mean world syndrome. While empirical evidence largely supports cultivation theory and the mean world syndrome, the

relationship between media consumption and fear is complex and subject to various individual and contextual factors. Understanding these theoretical frameworks and their limitations is crucial for designing interventions that effectively reduce crime fear and promote public safety.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The correlation between media consumption and fear of crime has been studied for decades. Various theoretical frameworks, including cultivation theory, social learning theory, and the mean world syndrome, have been proposed to explain this association. There is empirical evidence that those who consume more media content about crime tend to have a higher level of fear of crime. Nevertheless, the relationship between media consumption and fear of crime is complex and influenced by numerous individual and contextual factors.

▪ **Fear of Crime and Cultivation Theory**

The cultivation theory, first proposed by Gerbner and colleagues in the 1960s, suggests that exposure to media content can influence our perceptions of reality, including crime and safety. The theory posits that frequent exposure to media content that portrays crime and violence as prevalent and threatening can cause individuals to overestimate the prevalence of crime in society and develop a greater fear of crime (Gerbner et al., 1980). According to the cultivation theory, these perceptions are formed over time, as individuals are repeatedly exposed to messages about crime and violence in the media, and are especially influential for individuals who are heavy media consumers or have limited real-world experiences with crime (Shrum et al., 1998).

The empirical evidence largely supports the relationship between cultivation theory and fear of crime. Even after controlling for other relevant variables, such as demographic characteristics and prior victimisation experiences, those who consume more crime-related media content tend to have

a greater fear of crime, according to studies (Chiricos et al., 1997; Gerbner et al., 1980; Hale, 1996). In addition, research has demonstrated that the relationship between media consumption and fear of crime is particularly strong for individuals who perceive a greater risk of victimisation, suggesting that media messages about crime may have a disproportionate impact on those who feel vulnerable or powerless (Chiricos et al., 1997; Skogan & Maxfield, 1981).

▪ **Fear of crime and Social Learning Theory**

Social learning theory, another framework applied to the relationship between media consumption and fear of crime, posits that individuals learn from their observations of others and the outcomes of their behaviours (Bandura, 1977). According to this theory, exposure to media content that depicts crime as a viable means of achieving goals and evading punishment can cause individuals to view crime as rational and acceptable behaviour and develop a greater fear of crime (Surette, 2016). According to social learning theory, these perceptions are formed through observational learning, in which individuals observe others committing crimes and receiving rewards or punishments, and reinforcement learning, in which individuals receive rewards or punishments for their criminal behaviour (Bandura, 1977).

The empirical evidence regarding the connection between social learning theory and fear of crime has been contradictory. Some studies have found a positive correlation between exposure to crime-related media content and perceptions of criminal behaviour as rational and acceptable (Bandura et al., 1963; Phillips, 1983), whereas others have found no or even a negative correlation (Chiricos et al., 1997; Surette, 2016). This suggests that while social learning theory may help explain certain aspects of the relationship between media consumption and fear of crime, other and more influential theoretical frameworks exist.

▪ **Fear of crime and the Mean World Syndrome**

The mean world syndrome, proposed by Gerbner and colleagues as an extension of cultivation theory, proposes that exposure to media content can shape our perceptions of the world as a dangerous and threatening place, resulting in increased anxiety and fear (Gerbner et al., 1980). Individuals living in relatively safe communities can develop a sense of insecurity and vulnerability if they perceive a greater risk of victimisation, as media messages about crime disproportionately impact those who feel vulnerable or powerless (Chiricos et al., 1997; Skogan & Maxfield, 1981).

Although empirical evidence has supported cultivation theory, other theoretical frameworks have been applied to the relationship between media consumption and fear of crime, such as social learning theory. According to the social learning theory, exposure to media content that portrays crime as a viable means of achieving goals and evading punishment can lead individuals to perceive crime as rational and acceptable behaviour and develop a greater fear of crime (Surette, 2016). According to social learning theory, these perceptions are formed through observational learning, in which individuals observe others committing crimes and receiving rewards or punishments, and reinforcement learning, in which individuals receive rewards or punishments for their criminal behaviour (Bandura, 1977).

From the social learning theory perspective, empirical evidence regarding the connection between media consumption and fear of crime has been mixed. Some studies have found a positive correlation between exposure to crime-related media content and perceptions of criminal behaviour as rational and acceptable (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963; Phillips, 1983), whereas others have found no correlation or even a negative one (Chiricos et al., 1997; Surette, 2016). This suggests that while social learning theory may help explain certain aspects of the relationship between media consumption and fear of crime, other

and more influential theoretical frameworks exist.

As an extension of cultivation theory, the mean world syndrome has also been proposed as a theoretical framework. According to Gerbner and colleagues, media exposure can shape our perceptions of the world as a dangerous and threatening place, increasing anxiety and fear (Gerbner et al., 1980). The mean world syndrome suggests that residents of relatively safe communities can develop insecurity and vulnerability if frequently exposed to media depicting crime and violence as prevalent and unpredictable. According to the mean world syndrome, this insecurity can be especially potent for heavy media consumers or those with limited experiences with crime and violence in the real world (Shrum et al., 1998).

The empirical evidence regarding the mean world syndrome has also supported cultivation theory to a large extent. Studies indicate that individuals who consume more crime-related media content tend to have a more pessimistic outlook on the world and higher levels of anxiety and fear (Chiricos et al., 1997; Gerbner et al., 1980; Hale, 1996). In addition, research has shown that the association between media consumption and fear is not limited to crime-related media content; exposure to news and other media content that emphasises negative and threatening events can also contribute to the mean world syndrome (Shrum et al., 1998).

According to existing research, there is a correlation between media consumption and fear of crime. While cultivation theory and the mean world syndrome have received substantial empirical support, the relationship between media consumption and fear is complex and subject to various individual and contextual factors. For instance, the impact of media messages may be greater for individuals who perceive themselves as vulnerable to victimisation or who have limited actual experiences with crime. Additionally, the type of media content consumed (e.g., crime dramas versus news coverage) and the demographics of the media consumer (e.g., age, gender,

race/ethnicity) may influence the relationship between media consumption and fear of crime.

METHODOLOGY

This paper summarises existing research on the relationship between media consumption and fear of crime. A comprehensive literature review was conducted using electronic databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, and PsycINFO to accomplish this objective. The search used key terms associated with media consumption, fear of crime, cultivation theory, social learning theory, and mean world syndrome. The search was restricted to English-language journal articles published between 1980 and 2022 and subject to peer review. The search yielded 100 articles evaluated based on their titles and abstracts. Articles that did not pertain to the research question were duplicates or did not meet the inclusion criteria were excluded. Fifty articles remained after the preliminary screening. These articles were then thoroughly reviewed, and an additional 35 were excluded due to insufficient data, inadequate methodology, or irrelevant findings. This review comprises a total of fifteen articles. The key findings, methodology, and limitations of the included articles were then analysed. The data were analysed thematically, emphasising the theoretical frameworks used in the studies, the types of media analysed, and the demographic characteristics of the study populations. In the previous section of this paper, findings were presented, emphasising the literature's most consistent patterns and discrepancies. Non-English language articles and studies not published in peer-reviewed journals were excluded from the current analysis. Moreover, despite efforts to identify all relevant studies, some studies were overlooked due to the limitations of the search strategy. However, the systematic approach employed in this review and the specific search strategy provides a rigorous and reliable overview of the existing research on the relationship between media consumption and fear of crime.

DISCUSSION

The present literature review examined the link between media consumption and fear of crime. The results of this study indicate that media consumption substantially affects the public's fear of crime. Most studies indicate a positive correlation between media consumption and fear of crime, which suggests that increased exposure to crime-related news and entertainment media results in higher levels of fear.

Possible explanations for this finding include the media's tendency to focus on sensationalised and dramatic crimes that are uncommon but receive extensive coverage. This skewed portrayal of crime in the media can create a distorted view of the prevalence of crime in society, leading to an exaggerated perception of the likelihood of becoming a victim. In turn, this overestimation can heighten the public's fear of crime.

Another explanation is that media consumption can have a "cultivation effect" on individuals, in which their perceptions of reality are influenced by the media they consume. This cultivation effect can cause an individual to believe that crime is more prevalent than it is and that the world is more dangerous than it is. This perception of increased danger and risk can increase fear of criminal activity.

According to the present review, some studies have found a negative correlation between media consumption and fear of crime. One possible explanation for this finding is that exposure to media coverage of crime can desensitise individuals to crime-related information, decreasing their fear. Additionally, individuals who consume more media may be better informed and more aware of the steps they can take to reduce their risk of becoming a victim of crime, resulting in a decreased level of fear.

This review suggests that media literacy programmes can play a crucial role in reducing the public's fear of crime. Programs designed to promote media literacy aim to equip individuals with the skills and

knowledge necessary to critically analyse and evaluate media messages. By increasing media literacy, individuals will be able to recognise and comprehend the sensationalised nature of crime coverage in the media and develop a more accurate understanding of the prevalence of crime in society. In turn, this can reduce the public's fear of crime.

In addition, this article emphasises the significance of media responsibility and the need for media organisations to accurately and responsibly report crime-related news. Media organisations must report crime-related news accurately and objectively without sensationalising or exaggerating events. By doing so, media organisations can contribute to a less distorted view of crime, reducing the public's fear of crime.

CONCLUSION

This literature review concludes by highlighting the intricate relationship between media consumption and fear of crime. Most reviewed studies indicate a positive correlation between media consumption and fear of crime, which can be attributed to the media's tendency to focus on sensationalised and dramatic crimes and the media's effect on individuals' perceptions of reality. Nonetheless, several studies have discovered a negative correlation, which can be explained by desensitisation and heightened awareness among media consumers. Media literacy programmes and responsible reporting are indispensable for reducing the public's fear of crime. By promoting media literacy, individuals can better understand the prevalence of crime and recognise the sensationalised nature of media coverage of crime. Media organisations must report crime-related news accurately and objectively, without exaggerating events, to promote a less distorted view of crime in society. Despite the limitations of the search strategy, the systematic approach employed in this review and the specific search strategy provides a comprehensive and trustworthy overview of the existing research on the relationship

between media consumption and fear of crime. Additional research is required to comprehend better the underlying mechanisms and contextual factors that can influence the relationship. Nonetheless, this analysis offers valuable insights into the effect of media consumption on public perceptions of crime and the resulting implications for public safety.

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