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THE CORRELATION BETWEEN MEDIA VIOLENCE, ANXIETY AND AGGRESSION AMONG YOUNG ADULTS

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Abstract: The rapid proliferation of digital media has intensified concerns regarding the psychological impact of violent media content on young adults. The present study investigated the correlational relationships among media violence exposure, anxiety, and aggression among young adults in India, guided by the General Aggression Model (Anderson & Bushman, 2002) and cultivation theory (Gerbner et al., 1986). A quantitative cross-sectional correlational design was employed. A purposively sampled group of 200 young adults (100 males, 100 females; age range: 18–25 years; M = 22.14, SD = 2.54) completed an online survey between January and February 2026. Three standardised instruments were administered: the Comprehensive Media Exposure Scale (C-ME Scale), the Generalized Anxiety Disorder 7-Item Scale (GAD-7), and the Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire (BPAQ-29). Pearson's product-moment correlation was used to analyse data. Results indicated that 87.5% of participants reported moderate media violence exposure (M = 62.83, SD = 10.76); 73.5% reported at least mild anxiety (M = 7.98, SD = 5.03); and 60% demonstrated above-average aggression (M = 79.62, SD = 16.59). All three null hypotheses were rejected: significant positive correlations were found between media violence exposure and aggression, $r(198) = .163$, $p = .021$; media violence exposure and anxiety, $r(198) = .188$, $p = .008$; and aggression and anxiety, $r(198) = .441$, $p < .001$. The findings support the General Aggression Model and cultivation theory, and underscore the need for integrated psychological interventions and media literacy programmes in higher education settings.

Index Terms: media violence exposure, aggression, anxiety, young adults, General Aggression Model, cultivation theory, correlational study

I. INTRODUCTION

The modern media landscape has fundamentally changed how content is consumed, particularly among young adults in emerging adulthood. Digital media strongly shapes psychological and behavioural health, and concerns are rising about the mental effects of ongoing screen-based media exposure. Research finds that young adults spend more than six and a half hours daily with screens, much of this time involving content with violent or aggressive themes (Psychiatric Times, 2017).

Media violence exposure — defined as the frequency and intensity with which an individual consumes media content depicting acts of physical aggression, verbal hostility, intimidation, and other antisocial behaviours — is a pervasive feature of young adults' daily digital lives. The literature identifies two particular psychological outcomes of concern: aggression and anxiety, both of which represent significant challenges for individual well-being and social functioning.

Albert Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory emphasises that learning occurs through observation, imitation, and modelling. When young adults observe violent behaviours in media, these experiences are stored as internal scripts that may eventually influence aggressive behaviour. Simultaneously, cultivation theory (Gerbner et al., 1986) posits that habitual consumption of violent media cultivates a distorted 'mean world' perception, generating chronic anxiety and fear of victimisation.

The present study addresses a notable gap in the Indian literature: despite high digital media use among young Indian adults, few studies have simultaneously examined media violence exposure, aggression, and anxiety using validated psychometric instruments within a single framework. This study aims to generate empirical evidence on how habitual violent media consumption relates to psychological well-being in this population.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A. General Aggression Model (GAM)

The General Aggression Model (Anderson & Bushman, 2002) is the primary theoretical framework for this study. The GAM integrates social learning theory, cognitive neo-associationistic theory(CNA), and script theory to explain how situational inputs — including media violence exposure — influence aggression through cognitive, affective, and arousal routes. Repeated exposure consolidates aggressive scripts, normative beliefs, and desensitisation to violence, making aggressive responding more likely. The GAM has received substantial empirical support across experimental and longitudinal designs.

B. Cultivation Theory

Cultivation theory (Gerbner et al., 1986) proposes that long-term, heavy media consumption gradually shapes viewers' perceptions of social reality. The central concept of the 'mean world syndrome' holds that heavy media consumers perceive the world as more violent and dangerous than it is, generating heightened anxiety, fear of victimisation, and generalised worry. In the contemporary digital landscape, young adults who routinely consume violent content may develop chronically elevated threat schemas that fuel anxiety responses.

C. Social Learning Theory

Bandura's (1977) social learning theory explains how aggressive behaviours are acquired through observational learning. When violent media behaviours are portrayed without negative consequences, they are more likely to be encoded and imitated. The theory also explains how repeated exposure to threatening media scenarios may condition anxiety responses through vicarious classical conditioning.

III. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A. Media Violence and Aggression

A substantial body of international research has documented significant positive associations between media violence exposure and aggression. Anderson et al. (2010) conducted a meta-analysis of 136 papers involving over 130,000 participants and found that violent media exposure was significantly associated with increased aggressive behaviour, thoughts, and feelings, while decreasing empathy and prosocial behaviour. Willoughby et al. (2012) found in a prospective cohort study that chronic violent video game exposure predicted significantly higher physical aggression even after controlling for earlier aggression levels and psychosocial risk factors.

B. Media Violence and Anxiety

Kort-Butler and Hartshorn (2011) found that heavy television viewing of violent content was significantly associated with fear of crime and generalised anxiety. Coyne et al. (2021) demonstrated that increased screen time during the COVID-19 pandemic — including violent media consumption — was significantly associated with elevated anxiety and depressive symptoms in young adults. These findings are consistent with cultivation theory's predictions regarding the anxiety-inducing effects of habitual violent media exposure.

C. Aggression and Anxiety

Coccaro et al. (2016) found significant overlap between anxiety disorders and aggression, pointing to shared neurobiological substrates involving the amygdala and HPA axis. Crick and Dodge (1994) argued that the hostile attribution biases characteristic of aggressive individuals overlap with the threat appraisal biases underlying anxiety, suggesting a shared cognitive vulnerability pathway. Indian studies (Das et al.,

2021; Laxmi & Deepthi, 2019) have similarly documented significant positive associations among these constructs in college student samples.

D. Research Gap

Despite the available literature, there is a paucity of empirical studies from India that simultaneously examine media violence exposure, aggression, and anxiety using validated psychometric instruments in a single design. Most available Indian studies have examined these constructs in isolation or employed unstandardised measures. The present study addresses this gap using three validated tools with a large, gender-balanced Indian young adult sample.

IV. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

A quantitative, non-experimental, cross-sectional correlational design was employed. Data were collected via an online self-report survey (Google Forms) between January and February 2026.

B. Sample

A total of 200 young adults (100 males, 100 females; age range: 18–25 years; M = 22.14, SD = 2.54) were recruited through purposive (criterion-based) sampling from across India. Participants were required to be between 18–25 years of age, English-literate, and provide informed consent.

C. Measures

Three standardised, validated self-report instruments were administered:

(1) Comprehensive Media Exposure Scale (C-ME Scale): A 22-item measure assessing frequency of exposure to violent/antisocial and prosocial media content on a 5-point Likert scale (total scores: 22–110).

(2) Generalized Anxiety Disorder 7-Item Scale (GAD-7; Spitzer et al., 2006): A brief screening tool assessing anxiety symptom severity over two weeks on a 4-point scale (total scores: 0–21; $\alpha = .92$).

(3) Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire (BPAQ-29; Buss & Perry, 1992): A 29-item measure of trait aggression across four subscales — Physical Aggression, Verbal Aggression, Anger, and Hostility — on a 5-point scale (total scores: 29–145; $\alpha = .89$).

Table 1: Summary of Study Variables

Variable	Type	Instrument	Score Range
Media Violence Exposure	Independent Variable (IV)	C-ME Scale	22–110
Aggression	Dependent Variable (DV1)	BPAQ-29	29–145
Anxiety	Dependent Variable (DV2)	GAD-7	0–21

D. Hypotheses

H_{01}: There is no significant relationship between media violence exposure and aggression among young adults.

H_{02}: There is no significant relationship between media violence exposure and anxiety among young adults.

H_{03}: There is no significant relationship between aggression and anxiety among young adults.

E. Statistical Analysis

Data were analysed using Pearson's product-moment correlation in IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 26.0); IBM Corp., 2019).. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequency distributions) were computed for all variables. All tests were two-tailed with significance level $\alpha = .05$. Effect sizes were interpreted using Cohen's (1988) criteria: small ($r = .10–.29$), medium ($r = .30–.49$), large ($r \geq .50$).

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics for all three variables are presented in Table 2. The mean C-ME Scale score (M = 62.83, SD = 10.76) fell within the Moderate Exposure range (52–81). The GAD-7 mean score (M = 7.98, SD = 5.03) corresponded to the Mild anxiety category (5–9). The BPAQ-29 mean score (M = 79.62, SD = 16.59) fell within the Above Average aggression category (77–89).

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables (N = 200)

Variable	M	SD	Min	Max	Mdn
C-ME Scale	62.83	10.76	19	92	62.00
GAD-7 (Anxiety)	7.98	5.03	0	21	7.00
BPAQ-29 (Aggression)	79.62	16.59	31	124	81.00

B. Score Category Distributions

Regarding media violence exposure, 87.5% of participants fell within the Moderate Exposure category, indicating that regular moderate consumption of violent media content is normative in this sample. For anxiety, 73.5% of participants reported at least mild anxiety symptoms (GAD-7 ≥ 5), with 35.0% in the Moderate or Severe categories. For aggression, 60.0% of participants scored in the Above Average, High, or Very High categories, reflecting notably elevated aggressive tendencies relative to general population norms.

Table 3: Score Category Distributions (N = 200)

Scale	Category	Score Range	n	%
C-ME Scale	Low Exposure	22–51	19	9.5%
	Moderate Exposure	52–81	175	87.5%
	High Exposure	82–110	5	2.5%
GAD-7	None–Minimal	0–4	53	26.5%
	Mild	5–9	77	38.5%
	Moderate	10–14	47	23.5%
	Severe	15–21	23	11.5%
BPAQ-29	Low	29–61	30	15.0%
	Average	62–76	50	25.0%
	Above Average	77–89	67	33.5%
	High	90–100	32	16.0%
	Very High	101–145	21	10.5%

C. Hypothesis Testing

Table 4: Pearson's Correlation Matrix for Study Variables (N = 200)

Variable	1. C-ME Scale	2. GAD-7	3. BPAQ-29	M (SD)
1. C-ME Scale	—			62.74 (11.17)
2. GAD-7 (Anxiety)	.188**	—		7.05 (4.34)
3. BPAQ-29 (Aggression)	.163*	.441***	—	79.62 (16.60)

Note. * p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001. df = 198 for all correlations.

Hypothesis 1 (H_{01}): A statistically significant positive relationship was found between media violence exposure (C-ME Scale) and aggression (BPAQ-29), r(198) = .163, p = .040 (small effect size). H_{01} is rejected.

Hypothesis 2 (H_{02}): A statistically significant positive correlation was found between media violence exposure and anxiety (GAD-7), r(198) = .188, p = .008 (small effect size). H_{02} is rejected.

Hypothesis 3 (H_{03}): A strong, statistically significant positive correlation was found between aggression (BPAQ-29) and anxiety (GAD-7), r(198) = .441, p < .001 (medium effect size), representing the strongest association in the study. H_{03} is rejected.

Table 5: Summary of Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Variables	r	p	df	Decision
H_{01}	C-ME Scale → BPAQ-29	.163	.021	198	Rejected
H_{02}	C-ME Scale → GAD-7	.188	.008	198	Rejected
H_{03}	BPAQ-29 ↔ GAD-7	.441	<.001	198	Rejected

D. Interpretation of Findings

The significant positive relationship between media violence exposure and aggression (r = .163, p = .021) is consistent with the General Aggression Model. Even at moderate exposure levels — characteristic of 87.5% of the sample — a detectable association with elevated aggression is observable. The small effect size is consistent with meta-analytic estimates (Anderson et al., 2010), suggesting media violence exposure is one of multiple contributors to aggressive tendencies.

The significant positive relationship between media violence exposure and anxiety (r = .188, p = .008) aligns with cultivation theory's 'mean world syndrome' framework. Young adults who regularly encounter violent media content may develop elevated threat appraisals and sustained hypervigilance, reflected in higher GAD-7 scores. The high anxiety prevalence in the sample (73.5% with at least mild symptoms) is consistent with reports of elevated anxiety among Indian college students.

The strongest finding was the medium-effect positive correlation between aggression and anxiety, r(198) = .441, p < .001. Neurobiologically, both constructs share overlapping substrates within the limbic system — particularly the amygdala and HPA axis — which regulate threat appraisal, stress reactivity, and emotional regulation (Coccaro et al., 2016). Cognitively, the threat appraisal biases underlying anxiety overlap with the hostile attribution biases characteristic of aggressive individuals (Crick & Dodge, 1994), suggesting a shared vulnerability pathway.

VI. CONCLUSION

The present study provides robust empirical evidence for significant positive associations among media violence exposure, aggression, and anxiety in a sample of 200 Indian young adults. All three null hypotheses were rejected. Media violence exposure was positively associated with both aggression and anxiety even at moderate exposure levels, and aggression and anxiety co-occurred substantially within this population. These findings are consistent with the General Aggression Model and cultivation theory.

The descriptive findings are noteworthy: near-ubiquitous moderate media violence exposure (87.5%), high anxiety prevalence (73.5% with at least mild symptoms), and elevated aggression levels (60.0% above average) collectively suggest considerable psychological strain among this graduate student population. The robust aggression-anxiety association (r = .441) warrants integrated clinical attention addressing both constructs simultaneously.

Practically, these findings call for (a) routine mental health screening in higher education institutions with evidence-based interventions such as CBT and mindfulness; (b) media literacy education programmes equipping young adults to critically evaluate violent media content; (c) integrated psychological

interventions that address aggression and anxiety concurrently; and (d) media platform-level responsibility through content advisories and screen-time management tools.

Limitations include the cross-sectional design precluding causal inference, reliance on self-report measures susceptible to social desirability bias, purposive sampling limiting representativeness, and the C-ME Scale's undifferentiated measurement across media types. Future research should employ longitudinal designs, disaggregate media platforms, and extend samples to more diverse Indian populations.

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