

Violence begets Violence: Case Analysis on Virtual Violence in Social Media

Dr. Rages John

Assistant Professor, Government College of Teacher Education, Kozhikode, Kerala

ABSTRACT

This paper is a case analysis of online discussion in the social media group. The members' violent responses to violent items posted in the groups were assessed in light of the existing theories on violence. The violent responses posted by different people across the globe had mutually aggravating effects, inviting more people with more violent suggestions. Both the innate and situational factors of violence seem to play respective roles in begetting violence on social media.

Key Terms: innate aggression, racial unconscious, contagion, deindividuation, desensitization

INTRODUCTION

Violence and aggression have been a part of human life since the beginning of recorded history and most likely since time immemorial. In the recorded history of 5600 years, nearly, more than 14,600 wars have been fought (Bartol & Bartol, 2011)⁴. The reasons for the wars vary across ages and, but research shows that aggression and violence are part of human evolution. Some are of the opinion that aggression is a residue of evolutionary history, having grown early as a survival mechanism and eventually became means to ensure security, and attain safety, commodities, and status (LeDoux, 1996)¹³.

A definitive definition of violence is hard to derive, but most experts state that, largely, violent behaviour is “the intent or attempt to harm someone physically or socially or to destroy an object” (Bartol & Bartol, 2011)⁴.

The factors of aggression and violence in human beings is the subject of discussion in this present paper. The elements contributing to the aggressive arousal and sustainment of violence turning the individuals into angry mobs have been analyzed here with examples taken from digital media discussion. The present generation mostly lives in digital media: exchanging, exploring, entertaining, interacting, and generating thoughts and opinions. Countless issues in myriad forms are shared in the digital media inviting views and opinions from different corners. As anything and everything is exposed, social media also serve as a platform for sharing community violence.

The Objective

The main objective of this paper is to assess how sharing of information and opinion, and holding discussions in digital media on community violence affect the attitude of adolescents.

The leading questions in the present study are:

1. What are the factors that make man violent?
2. How are these factors active in social media groups?
3. Do social media group discussions affect the attitude of the youngsters?
4. What is the possible means to check the influence of violence on young minds in digital media?

The Method

Case analysis of Face Book groups: responses to violent items posted in three Facebook groups were subjected to case analysis.

Population and sample

the population includes three Facebook groups comprising the members in the Facebook groups and their chain of friends. The sample for the study included three Facebook groups with all the respondents to the topic in question.

Data collection and analysis

For the present study secondary data on violence were collected from digital and print sources. The investigator also selected discussions on violence in three different Facebook groups as the cases for analysis. The course of discussion on violence provoking digital posts were subjected to analysis for drawing conclusions.

Theoretical Perspectives on Violence and Aggression

Violence as an area of study has gone through many adaptations. Early theories probing the reasons for violence focused on the biological framework of individuals. Scientists, especially psychologists claimed to determine the propensity of violence in individuals by analyzing their physical characteristics or their individual biology (LeDoux, 1996)¹³. The theorists who came later maintained that violence is not biologically determined but rather it is a product of one's environment. Another group believed that violence is the combined effect of certain biological indicators and socialization of an individual (Lerner, & Keltner, 2001)¹⁴. An interesting view held by crowd theorists is that "once an individual, who by themselves might be a rational and intelligent person, became a member of a crowd their individuality ceased to exist" (Kurtines, & Greif, 1974)¹¹. On the whole, there are two main general factors promoting hostility and violence: innate factors and situational factors.

Innate factors

Innate factors are those that are innate in the constitution of a person. They include psychodynamic, biological, and ethological aspects. According to psychodynamic theories, humans, by nature, are inclined to contentious impulses. They are prone to commit atrocious acts unless their impulses are promptly and effectively controlled (Bartol & Bartol, 2011)⁴. It was Sigmund Freud who presented this theory earliest. Freud opined that human beings are inherently aggressive from birth, and they are on the lookout for emotional outlets. Without appropriate ventilation for belligerence, an individual can burst out or lash out (Gay, 1990)⁹. Crowd behaviour theory based on Freud's postulation denotes that potential stimulus from the environment can assist to unlock the unconscious mind. This happens when the super-ego, or moral agent of consciousness, is displaced by the impulsive crowd. Similarly, C.G. Jung who differentiated between personal unconscious and collective unconscious, postulates that the attitude and excitements of the crowd are predominantly drawn from racial unconscious shared by a community (McLeod, 2018)¹⁶.

Convergence theory holds that violent crowd is a snapshot of the conjunction of like-minded individuals. Floyd Allport and Hanchett (1940)¹ points out that "An individual in a crowd behaves just as he would behave alone, only more so."¹ Crowds form from like-minded people, whose activities are then reinforced and exaggerated by the crowd itself. Floyd Allport believed that when violent people are converged individuality is maintained and accentuated. "Crowd behaviour is pathological and meaningless but locates and accentuates the pathology of the individuals rather than a collective influence by simply being present in a group" (Mancino, M., 2014)¹⁵.

Another version of innate aggression theory springs from ethology or evolutionary psychology. A study of animal behaviour in its natural habitat in comparison with human behaviour is called ethology.. A renowned ethologist, Konrad Lorenz, opined that aggression, among both animals and humans, is an inbred instinct and is, within and of itself, an instinctive and driving force remarked for its extemporaneity and centrality to species conservation. Lorenz also viewed that ritualized onslaught within the animal kingdom demonstrates power and dominance over members of the same species, evolved as a means for self-defence and to thwart extinction. However, uncontrolled fighting within a group, he stated, would ultimately assure its extinction. He pointed out that "humans outdistanced the evolutionary process of ritualized aggression and replaced it with technological capabilities and superior learning ability thus developing the capacity to maim and kill members of their own species" (Bartol & Bartol, 2011)⁴.

When researchers are comparing human beings to animals, evolutionary psychology fails to stand up to intense scrutiny. Humans and animals are incomparable on certain parameters, as the animal kingdom lacks "the capacity to exercise control over one's own thought processes, motivation, and action is a distinctively human characteristic" (Bandura, 1989)³.

Aggression and violence are reconsidered a matter of an individual's biology, according to multiple theories. Biology consists of heredity, hormones, neurophysiology, and human instinct. A pioneering study on the influence of biology on violence was in 1876, done by Cesare Lombroso who avowed that "traits of subordinate animals and primitive men reemerged intermittently in some individuals" (Credo Reference)²⁰. Similar research has been accomplished by experts

like Jacobs, Brunton, Melville, Brittain, and McClymont which has mostly focused on the imbalance of chromosomes as a reason for violence (Credo Reference)²⁰. Such studies are undeniable in the sense that there have been reported incidents of aggression and assassination wherein the culprits did exhibit chromosomal abnormality, even though the frequency was insufficient to conclude a decisive correlation. However, reckoning biological factors for violence is mostly baseless because it has been disproved by unmet aggressive offenders who show no hormonal abnormalities.

Situational Factors

The theoretical view called situationism maintains that stimuli from environment can control behavior (Bartol & Bartol, 2011)⁴. This view emerged against the fact that researchers on criminology and aggression weigh heavily on dispositional factors and ignore situational influences. Environment can cause frustration in individuals driving them to turn aggressive. This is emphasized by renowned psychologist John Dollard and et al. (1939), that “aggression results due to people feeling frustrated, thwarted, annoyed or threatened”⁸. Another psychologist Leonard Berkowitz (1990) notes that “the presence of aggressive stimuli in the external environment also increases the probability of aggression”⁵. What he is referring to is a type of aggression generally considered the ‘weapon effect’ because it is mostly aroused when a weapon like a firearm is brandished. Berkowitz put forward that the display of weapons openly can work as conditional stimuli which elicit notions and reactions allied to their use.

Deindividuation theory extensively explains that in the context of typical crowding, factors such as anonymity, group unity, and arousal can diminish self-control effectuated by guilt, shame, self-evaluating behaviour. Being anonymous in a group disconnects individuals from their personal identities and diminishes their concern about social evaluation. Devoid of self-restraints, their individual sensitivity to the environment increases with a lessening effect on rational foresight. This is how a group of individuals turn to antisocial behaviour. Similar theories have stated that “deindividuation hinges upon a person being unable, due to situation, to have strong awareness of their self as an object of attention” (Mancino, 2014)¹⁵. This way, being unattended personally, an individual enjoys anonymity and, is devoid of the necessity for maintaining normal social behaviour.

The role of situation is also evinced by Contagion theory which suggests that the attitudes of individuals in a group are likely to influence the attitudes of others in that group. Such contagion of mental disposition occurs when they have frequent and redundant contact (Credo Reference)²⁰. The theory propounds that crowds can exert a hypnotic influence on its members leading to irrational and emotionally charged behaviour.

Another theory that supports situational factors is the Emergent-norm theory. This theory holds that norms might emerge owing to social interface among individuals who read cues from a crowd to decide what they are expected to do. Some individuals with a lack of clear norms are uncomfortable in themselves and therefore seize on whatever norms emerge from the group (Mancino, M., 2014)¹⁵.

People also act as a response to a perceived wrong done in public, and the response can become another wrong in massive form. In other words, a riot can occur in response to a supposed wrong or a grievance. What happens to an individual who gets involved in a violent act? Gustave Le Bon (2009) answers that an individual involved in violence passes through “three stages: submergence, contagion, and suggestion.”¹² While in submergence, the individual in a violent crowd loses his/her sense of personal self and personal accountability. This happens because of the anonymity of the crowd.

Contagion is the tendency of an individual to blindly take in the mood and manner of a crowd. It is the propensity to unquestioningly follow the dominant views and emotions of the crowd. In Le Bon's view, this effect spread like a contagious disease among the “submerged” individual members of the group. The third stage, Suggestion refers to the period during which the views and emotions of the crowd are mainly drawn from their shared racial unconscious. Since this behaviour comes from an archaic shared unconscious it is primitive in nature. Those members who are weak-willed and have limited moral and cognitive skills are affected readily by suggestions.

Violence Begets Violence

Public protests, marches, crowding, and hostility can assume many forms and may occur for any number of reasons. Exposure to community violence ignites the dispositional factors and stimulates the potential for violence in an individual (Miller, & Dollard, 1941)¹⁷. The situational factors nurture the aggressive nature within the individual turning them in to criminals. Any type of violence from unpredicted mob violence to official execution of capital punishment in public make the spectators desensitized and eventually one or other of them turns up to the place of the executed criminal.

Exposure to aggression at severe levels or across several situations has been noted as the reason for emotional desensitization, denoted by low levels of internalizing signs, making individuals capable of witnessing and engaging in atrocities with nonchalance. Theoretically, desensitization to violent scenes characterizes a kind of habituation, that naturally through the means of stimulus generalization spreads to similar stimuli and beyond the contexts.

Virtual Violence: the three cases

Children who experience violence become ensnared in a cycle of violence. This holds true for all types of childhood violence exposure including sharing of violence through social media. Today's youth are digitally connected in social media groups which serve as platform for sharing community violence. How exposure to violence in media affects children is assessed by the example of three instances from Kerala.

Case-1: In the early 2018 an incident of mob beating a man to death for stealing food from shops, had taken place in Kerala. The gruesome death of the hungry man had evoked rage and protest from the public when the case had been reported. The case was presented in a social media group which consisted of youngsters mostly college students. As the image of that man, looking helpless before his death was posted on the social media group, mixed reactions of violence were poured in, lamenting his murder and threatening the murderers. The members of the group were contesting for chalking out more horrid means to retaliate against the death of that helpless hungry man. In fact, the social media group turned into an angry mob who virtually pounced on their prey.

Case-2: Another incident was the posting of an image of a man, who was accused of raping a girl child to death. Whereabouts and veracity of the real incident was unknown, however, the photo posted showed the accused being burned alive by an angry mob in retaliation to the wickedness he did on the girl child. The youngsters in the digital group instantly 'joined' the angry mob to burn the accused. More than 3000 supportive reactions (likes) came, some of them posting verbal abuse and suggesting more severe and atrocious means of punishing the man. The image of the man looked horrific crying pathetically from the flames; however, the angry mob, both in the picture and in the media seemed to be contented by his suffering.

Case-3: The third instance is also a photo shared in Facebook group, of a man accused of brutal murder, inviting suggestions for the kind of punishment he deserves. Here also the youngsters in the social group competed with each other suggesting ways of inhuman torture on the accused. The number of supportive reactions (likes) transcended 2000 and were growing steadily.

Effect of the Virtual Violence: discussion

The gruesome and gory suggestions in the social media create mental images which brain process same as the images received from sense organs in the actual situation (Norman, 2010).¹⁸ Hence, imagining a brutality is equal to witnessing a brutality producing the same emotional effects with corresponding attitudinal and behavioural expressions. "Perception and imagination are linked because the brain uses the same neural circuits for both functions. Imagination is like running perception in reverse," says Gregory Berns (2008)⁶, a professor of neuro economics and director of the Center for Neuropolicy at Emory University.

Researches in neuroscience have proved that imagined incidents are recalled from memory as real incidents (Davidson, 2004)⁷. In an experiment conducted by Ken A. Paller (2014)¹⁹ some people were asked to imagine some objects and were asked to remember them later. The subjects remembered them as if they had seen them actually. Paller says: "These mental images left a trace in the brain that was later mistaken for the trace that would have been produced had that object actually been seen." Research findings validate the assumption that the participants in the social media who were collectively generating imagined atrocities have the same experience as that of the mob who had inflicted brutal punishment on the accused. Thus social group becomes a mob in the electronic medium.

"Everything your 'immaterial' mind imagines leaves material traces in the brain and in the body. Each thought alters the physical state of your brain connection," says Doidge Norman (2010). Therefore, from a neuroscientific point of view, imagination of an act and actually doing the same are not as different as they seem. Evidences from brain scans show that many parts of the brain are equally activated in an imagination as in an action. Research conducted by Ayanna K. Thomas and Deborah E. Hannula, Elizabeth F. Loftus (2006)² also has validated that imagination can powerfully affect behaviour as a real event. That explains why the members in the social media group increasingly made violent suggestions and proposed atrocious actions.

Those individuals who genetically inclined to violence will be much more vulnerable in the social media, the discussion and visualization of violence in social media groups serve as situational factors evoking violence among the

youth. In social media group the members experience a Deindividuation effect as in typical mob situations, giving them cohesiveness, anonymity and arousal for antisocial behaviour. As Contagion theory suggests the responses from the other members in the social group have a hypnotic influence on the individuals evoking irrational and emotionally charged behavior. As the members interact on violence, new norms may emerge favoring violence. This group norm will devour the individual perception on law and order making the members unhesitatingly follow the domineering views and passions of the crowd.

CONCLUSION

Incidence of violence and aggression, whether out on religious, political, or personal grounds, is reflected in social media and, practically, turn the members into mob giving out dreadful and offensive reactions. Media Group discussions that proceed like a herd without a guide, mislead the youth, igniting aggressive disposition. Thus moral individuals can be turned into immoral idiots through the powerful media presentation of violence and supportive discussion over them. Individuals in a group have the proclivity to blindly follow the dominant mood of the crowd which are basically drawn from a common racial unconscious.

The theories on the situational factors of violence support the fact that members who are submerged in the group norm for violence, eventually arise as potential offenders ready for aggressiveness in future. The presence of a teacher as a counsellor and a guide is inevitable in social media to contain the course of social media groups turning into a mob. Teaching is not limited to the classroom and not to class time, but spreads round the clock. This entails a digitally 'resident' teacher in the social media who is accessible and who can affect the digital discussions among youngsters.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Allport, & F.H, Hanchett, G.A. (1940). The War-Producing Behavior of Citizens: A Scale of Measurement, with Preliminary Results in Imagined Situations. *Journal of Social Psychology*. 11: 447-490.
- [2]. Ayanna K. T.; Deborah E. H.& Elizabeth F. L.(2006). How Self-relevant Imagination Affects Memory for Behaviour. Research articles published online, <https://doi.org/10.1002/acp.1270>
- [3]. Bandura, A. (1989). Human Agency in Social Cognitive Theory. Retrieved from Texas A&M University, Meagher Lab: <http://meagherlab.tamu.edu/M-Meagher/Health%20360/Psyc%20360%20articles/Psyc%20360%20Ch%203/self-efficacy.pdf>
- [4]. Bartol, C. R., & Bartol, A. M. (2011). Criminal Behavior: A Psychological Approach (Ninth ed.). Pearson Education: New Jersey.
- [5]. Berkowitz, L. (1990). On the formation and regulation of anger and aggression: A cognitive-neoassociationistic analysis. *American Psychologist*, 45(4), 494–503. doi:10.1037/0003-066x.45.4.494
- [6]. Berns, G. (2008). Neuroscience Sheds New Light on Creativity. retrieved on 21/04/2022 from <https://www.fastcompany.com/1007044/neuroscience-sheds-new-light-creativity>
- [7]. Davidson, S. (2004). Some Imagination! How Memory Fails Us. *LiveScience*. November 1, 2004 <https://www.livescience.com/23-imagination-memory-fails.html>
- [8]. Dollard, J., Miller, N. E., Doob, L. W., Mowrer, O. H., & Sears, R. R. (1939). Frustration and aggression. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- [9]. Gay, P. (1990). Reading Freud. London. Yale University Press.
- [10]. [10]. Gregory B. (2009). Imagination and the Brain. *Lecture Published on 31 Mar 2009 in youtube*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eP5AMNNjnhE>
- [11]. Kurtines, W. , & Greif, E. B. (1974). The Development of Moral Thought: Review and Evaluation of Kohlberg's Approach. *Psychological Bulletin*, 81(8), 453-470.
- [12]. Le Bon, G. (2009). Psychology of Crowds. Sparkling Books edition. Sparkling Books. Southampton, United Kingdom
- [13]. LeDoux, J. E. (1996). The Emotional Brain. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- [14]. Lerner, J. S. , & Keltner, D. (2001). Fear, anger, and risk. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 81(1), 146-159.
- [15]. Mancino, M. (2014). Crowd Violence Analysis - WordPress.com <https://mmancinoblog.files.wordpress.com/2014/12/crowd-violence-analysis.pdf>
- [16]. McLeod, S. A. (2018). *Carl Jung*. Simply Psychology. <https://www.simplypsychology.org/carl-jung.html>
- [17]. Miller N.E.& Dollard, J.(1941). Social Learning and Imitation. New Haven: Yale University Press, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2570586>
- [18]. Norman, D.(2010). The Brain That Changes Itself. PDF (Free | 224 Pages) - PDF Drive: <https://www.pdfdrive.com/the-brain-that-changes-itself-e30084982.html>



- [19]. Paller Ken, A. (2004). Electrical Signals of Memory and of the Awareness of Remembering. *Research Article Published online on April 1, 2004. Sage Journals:* <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.0963-7214.2004.00273.x>
- [20]. http://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/bksoc/emergent_norm_theory/0?searchId=2fe3e24e-662e-11e4-8a59-0aea1e3b2a47&result=0