

# Negative effects of media on youth: causal effect analysis



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Natasha Nguyen

*Why is it difficult to show that media causes harm to young people?*

## Introduction

The impact of the media on young people has long been an issue, with concern that younger audiences are negatively influenced by media. Effects research has been used to determine whether media causes harm on young people. However, media effects research has its difficulties in generating viable results. This paper will outline why it is difficult to show a direct causal effect from media resulting in negative outcomes and behaviours from young audiences. No media effects researchers believe in direct effects and a cohort of media scholars make valid claims supporting this statement. Barrie Gunter effectively explains the validity problems with media effects research, with Albert Bandura's famous 'Bobo Doll' experiment as an example. David Gauntlett's views on the flaws of the effects model are also relevant to the discussion and McQuail makes very constructive points on how audiences can choose how they let media affect them. To further justify that it is difficult to show that media causes harm to people, the ideas discussed will be related to the case study of the murder of 2 year old James Bulger.

## Validity of Effects Research

Early media effects experiments, such as the Payne Fund Studies, consisted of children participants being placed in artificial environments (Gunter 2008, p. 1085). They were fed dosages of media violence controlled by researchers

who then exposed them to environments where they could behave in aggressive ways if they choose to (Gunter 2008, p. 1085). However, these studies have been criticized by scholars for lacking validity (Sparks, Sparks & Sparks 2009, p. 272). The experiments were too far-fetched to produce any feasible results about media effects as they were artificial; taking users out of their natural habitats, feeding them media they would not usually consume and using unrealistic representatives for real-life violence (Ruddock 2013, p. 27). Gunter (2008) is especially adequate at explaining the problems with validity in effects studies. He outlines the issues with conducting experiments in artificial settings. Participants are aware of researchers and act accordingly, doing what they thought the researcher wanted (Gunter 2008, p. 1088). Gunter (2008, p. 1102) reports how the selection of media extracts fed to participants were devoid of their original context and could be interpreted differently when embedded in their original source. Media effects research cannot be discussed without referencing Bandura's (1963) Bobo Doll experiment (Sparks, Sparks & Sparks 2009, p. 272). The study illustrated that when watching a televised model commit aggressive actions, children were more likely to imitate the actions if the model was rewarded instead of punished (Sparks, Sparks & Sparks 2009, p. 272). This suggests an association between aggressive media influences on the children to mimic the aggressive acts but Gunter (2008) cautioned against mistaking association for causation. There were many flaws to that experimentation, with even Bandura (2009, p. 110) himself discussing the severe constraints tied to controlled experimentation.

Flaws in the “ Effects Model”

<https://assignbuster.com/negative-effects-of-media-on-youth-causal-effect-analysis/>

In response to traditional media effects studies, Gauntlett (1998) discusses the flaws of media effects studies, outlining why it cannot be used to prove that media causes direct harm to young people. Firstly, he discredits effects research for coming to social problems backwards. Researchers start with violent media and attempt to find ways to connect it to social problems, such as aggression, instead of beginning with social problems to find their causes (Gauntlett 1998, p. 214). Gauntlett (1998, p. 216) also criticizes the effects model for treating children as inadequate and more manipulable than adults, being influenced into behavior adults wouldn't be. He questions the validity of effects research by discussing the use of artificial studies, claiming that they are selective and based on the belief that the subjects will not change their behavior as a result of being observed (Gauntlett 1998, p. 219). In examining some of the flaws that Gauntlett presents, it is clear that it is difficult to research media effects to show a direct causal effect as the methods traditionally used undermine the validity of the results.

#### Audience's Choices on Effects

The influence media has commonly depends on audience motivations, as information conveyed is not what influences audiences but rather people's self-determined reaction to this information (Petty, Brinol & Priester 2009, p. 126). Pieslack (2007) delves into this concept through his studies of music and war. He states that people voluntarily expose themselves to the effects of media, citing soldiers at war as an example who become aggressive after listening to rap music because they want to become aggressive (Pieslack 2007, p. 134). McQuail (1997, p. 205) explains how typical effects models were perceived as a one-way process of causality, from media to consumer, <https://assignbuster.com/negative-effects-of-media-on-youth-causal-effect-analysis/>

where the audience was viewed as a passive recipient of media content. However, individuals have unique tastes in media, with some more inclined to expose themselves to media violence (McQuail 1997, p. 206). This destroys the notion of media messages being forced upon individuals unwillingly, evidencing that young audiences knowingly visit effects upon themselves (Ruddock 2013, p. 28). Young people often learn from media because they choose to (Bandura 2009, p. 97). This demonstrates the difficulty in showing that media causes harm to young people as there may be a correlation between aggression but there is no proof of direct causation, with certain individuals choosing to let media influence them (Gunter 2008, p. 1095).

### Audiences Backgrounds

Media aggression does not have the same effects on everyone and some may be more susceptible than others to effects of media violence (Gunter 2008, p. 1095). Individual media audiences have different psychological makeups that influence the way they respond to aggressive media (Gunter 2008, p. 1112). The consumption of violence and aggression from media is complex and must account for the audience's differing psychological profiles (Gunter 2008, p. 1097). Media violence can produce aggression when paired with troubled social conditions (Ruddock 2013, p. 35). We cannot assume that violence from media consumers is directly linked back to the media as there are many other influences which can cause aggression in individuals. Peer influences, family conflicts and other factors may all influence aggressive behaviour (Sparks, Sparks & Sparks 2009, p. 273). It has also been reviewed that negative effects of media violence were mostly visible <https://assignbuster.com/negative-effects-of-media-on-youth-causal-effect-analysis/>

among the poor, less educated and socially disenfranchised (Ruddock 2013, p. 35). This proves that violent media effects are mostly a risk for individuals whom already had difficult lives and as a result, it is difficult to prove a direct causal effect from violent media.

### The James Bulger Murder

In 1993, controversy over media effects on children surfaced following the murder of two-year-old James Bulger by two ten-year-old boys, Jon Venables and Robert Thompson. Bulger's body was found mutilated on a railway line two days after his murder. Though no evidence of it was brought to trial, violence in videos was considered a possible stimulus. There were many links made by the press between the crime and events in a film called Childs Play 3 (Bignell 2002, p. 134). Venable's father had rented the film however, Venables did not live with his father and had never seen the film (Bignell 2002, p. 134). There was no way to connect the crime to the film and direct effects were never proven and authorities concluded that the crime was the case of two disturbed individuals acting on dark impulses, rather than on the influence of violent media. Thompson grew up in a brutal environment, being assaulted by five older brothers and an alcoholic mother. His tough upbringings may have produced aggression when paired with violent media. He could have chosen to let aggressive media influence him voluntarily, wanting to become more aggressive to deal with his surroundings. This underlines Pieslack's (2007) point about audiences voluntarily exposing themselves to media effects. The boys' psychological makeup could account for their actions and their responses to aggressive media. Venables came from troubled family conditions, exhibited low self esteem and was

<https://assignbuster.com/negative-effects-of-media-on-youth-causal-effect-analysis/>

temperamentally fragile. His difficult circumstances made him more vulnerable to the effects of media content, as discussed by Gunter (2008). It would be wrong to assume that violent media directly caused the boys to commit the crime as there was no direct proof and a range of other factors clearly had influence on the pair.

### Concluding Remarks

It is difficult to show that media causes harm to young people and that a direct causal effect resulting in negative outcomes exists. The view that media has direct and powerful effects on audiences is more accepted by the general public than media effects scholars (Oliver & Krakowiak 2009, p. 517). Some researchers acknowledge that media violence can influence viewers but not in all circumstances, all audiences and not directly (Gunter 2008, p. 1063). Media effects scholars such as Gunter, Gauntlett, Pieslack and McQuail disagree with direct causal effects. In researching media effects through experimentation, results compiled are questioned for their validity as research conducted in artificial environment can encourage unnatural participant responses. Aggressive behaviour cannot be solely blamed on violent media content as there are many other factors which influence an individual's motives for being violent. As seen through the James Blumer case study, an individual's motives, psychological makeup and social background can influence the level of power media has over them and disproves the idea of direct effects.

## Reference List

- Gauntlett, D 1998, ' Ten Things Wrong with the Effects Model', in R Dickinson, R Harindranath & O Linne (ed.), *Approaches to Audiences: A Reader* , Arnold Publishers, London, pp. 120-130
- Gunter, B 2008, ' Media Violence: Is There a Case for Causality?', *American Behavioural Scientist* , vol. 51, no. 8, pp. 1061-1122
- McQuail,
- Oliver, M & Krakowiak, K 2009, ' Individual Differences in Media Effects', in J Bryant & M Oliver (ed.), *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research* , Routledge, New York, pp. 517-531
- Petty, R, Brinol, P & Priester, J 2009, ' Mass Media Attitude Change: Implications of the Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion', in J Bryant & M Oliver (ed.), *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research* , Routledge, New York, pp. 517-531
- Pieslack, J 2007, ' Sound Targets: Music and the War in Iraq', *Journal of Musicological Research* , vol. 26, no. 2, pp. 129-149
- Ruddock, A 2013, *Youth and Media* , SAGE Publications, London
- Sparks, G, Sparks, C & Sparks, E 2009, ' Media Violence', in J Bryant & M Oliver (ed.), *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*, Routledge, New York, pp. 269-286