

Media usage, media violence and the Nigerian Child

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Abstract

This study examines media usage and the effect of viewing media violence on Nigerian children. Child violence has become massive in recent years. There is also the fear that it will be worse in the future. Many claimed that the rise of child violence emanates from the use of violent media. The objective of this study is therefore to examine the impact of electronic media use on some of the violent acts carried out by some Nigerian children. The study uses sociological and analytical methods. 70 questioners were printed and distributed to parents. 59 questioners came back but 2 were incomplete and were destroyed. 57 were used. The focus of the study is on children between the ages of 0-12. The study area is Sapele Delta State. The study finds that children between the ages of 0-6 love more of educational programs while children between the ages of 7 to 12 prefer films with violent content. Also, viewing violent films makes children develop aggressive and violent behaviour especially fighting and bully towards their friends. It is my recommendation that caregivers give closer attention to their children and reduce their engagement with violent media. This, no doubt, will help to reduce the rate of violent act among Nigerian children in the future.

Keywords

Child Development, Electronic Media, Environment, Nigerian Child, Violence.

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Introduction

Recently, in Nigeria, there is the report of aged children who constantly harassed, abuse and coerced younger children especially at school. There are also several record of deaths resulting from such physical violence which had led to some children sustaining serious injury and even death. In early December, 2021, for example, a 12 year old Sylvester Oromoni, a student of Downen College, Lekki in Lagos State was said to have been beaten to death by some of his peers in the school for refusing to accept to join a fraternity (Afeez Hanafi, 2022). Many have linked the outcome of the incident and other similar ones to children exposure to films that features confraternity and violence.

In today's society, electronic media are thoroughly integrated into the fabric of children's lives, with television and movies central to both work and play. Recent studies indicate that not only the old, but the young are using a wide variety of screen media (Rideout, Vandewater & Wartella, 2003). There are rapidly growing markets for early childhood television programming, computer software for toddlers, and video series for infants which makes almost every child drawn to using any of such media, and or wanting to see what is being shown in it.

No doubt, there are many areas in which media use affects children. They range from health and safety to social development and education. The consequences of each are wide-ranging and can be both positive and negative. It is therefore of importance to examine these impacts due to the large population of children in our modern society that is exposed mostly to these media. "In recent years, the opportunities for young people to use media have grown exponentially, with more TVs, video game players, and computers in the home and bedroom and myriads of new mobile devices like cell phones and iPods for watching videos, playing games, and listening to music on the go. As these opportunities for media use have grown, young people have also taken them up eagerly and begun spending ever more time with media each day.

These days, hardly there is another activity that young people devote as much of their daily life to as they do to media usage. Even at that, the media's place in their lives is still growing. The types of messages they are exposed to, the information they learn, the people and products they connect to, and the creativity some media afford them also varies from one community to another and in age grades (Rideoute 2015).

Each Week, in Nigeria, thousands of children are being born (Nigeria Birth Rate, 1950-2022). Because of the large number of children we have in the society today, it is important, especially now, to examine certain impacts of media use on them. In India for example, children below 15 years constitute almost half of the country's population. It is only after the age of 13 or 14 that most children begin to develop formed values and habits. Up to this age, the children's personality, code of ethics, and values are all open to socializing influences in his environment and such environment includes the media (Wilson 20). Also, 43.2% of Nigeria's population are children below 14 years. This means that the population of Nigerian children (male) of age 0-14 years will be about 39.151.304/ female 37.353.737 (Nigeria people, 2015). As a result of such a large population and a gazing into the future, one begins to wonder how engagement in violent media will affect the society in the future. There is an urgent need to examine the effect of violent media on children of today for a recommendation and urgent attention.

Notwithstanding, among researches that had been carried out on children, media violence has been studied the most. The reason is not hidden. The growing rate of violence among young ones is very high in modern society. Rowell and Laramie (2006) attested that the “influence of the violent mass media is best viewed as one of the many potential factors that influence the risk for violence. No reputable researcher is suggesting that media violence is “the” cause of violent behaviour. Rather, multiple factors converging overtime contribute to such behaviour”. Furthermore, headlines and news media coverage are presenting stories of more and more violent behaviours, often committed by children of younger and younger ages. Lieb, (1998) presents some stories:

Most recently, two boys, ages 7 and 8, were charged with murdering an 11-year-old girl in Chicago. The offenders were reported to be the youngest on record for this type of crime. We were told that the boys killed the young girl so they could have her new bicycle. Two British youngsters kidnapped a two-year-old from a shopping mall and stoned him to death with rocks. 14-year-old Mitchell Johnson, who was involved in a similar crime stated, “I didn’t mean to do it. I thought we were going to shoot over their heads.

Lieb’s story shows that a major influence on the growth of violent behavior occurs in the prime of a child’s emotional developmental life. Also, in line with assumption, Judith (2003) asserts that:

As our children grow and develop attitudes and beliefs about the world and how it works, they are plugged into the electronic media from morning till night. The pictures, images, and sounds they hear are being imprinted practically from birth.

She warned that if we, as concerned citizens, do not begin to address the presentations of violence, senseless killing, and merged sex and violence in the electronic media, we become at risk for even greater proliferation of such images and the loss of more and younger children to their influence.

The result of Rowell and Laramie, Lieb and Judith studies cited above indicate that researchers should not hands down in their study of effect of violent media on young ones. Rather, they need to examine particular media influence on children in each society. This is because same content may have different effect on children of different communities. Following this need, therefore, I examined the impact of electronic media use especially those with violent content on some of the violent acts carried out by some Nigerian children. To ascertain the impact, the study seeks parent's and caregiver's opinions. The sociological research method is used because it allows me to have access to my target audience. Children between ages 0-12 were focused on. The reason for this choice is because children of this age bracket are most vulnerable to violent act and violent behaviour. Because some of these children are not old enough to complete a copy of the questioner, parents and caregivers made their observations. A good number of the research population and sample size have representatives from the low, middle, and upper-class citizens who are from different parts of the country residing in Sapele, Delta State, Nigeria. While most may have a television set, a computer set/ computer game, a phone that can access the internet, others may not have access to cable television which gives them more room to access different stations.

1. Literature Review

It is important to clearly define the terms media violence and violent behaviour. Definitions of these terms abound. Among the definitions is that of Rowell and Laramie (2006) which posits that media violence is the visual portrayal of acts of physical aggression by one human against another. This definition does not include off-screen poisonings that might be implied, but rather it refers to visually portrayed physically aggressive acts by one person against another. Rowell further explains that:

Aggressive behavior refers to an act intended to injure or irritate another person. The act could be physical or nonphysical. This includes many kinds of behavior that do not seem to fit the commonly understood meaning of violence. Hurling insults and spreading harmful rumours fits the definition. Of course, the aggressive behaviors of greatest concern to society involve physical aggression, however, physical aggression may range in severity from acts such as pushing or shoving to more serious physical assaults and fighting, even extending to violent acts that carry a significant risk of serious injury.

In 2011, Victoria and Ellen presented a report on overall media exposure among children of White, Black, Hispanic, and Asian American Children. They explained that “adding up all of the time young people spend listening to music, watching TV, playing video games, using the computer, reading print, and going to the movies; White children consume an average of about 8:36 of media content a day, Black children about 12:59, Hispanic children 13:00, and Asian children about 13:13 per day. Roberts & Foehr in Kaiser Family Foundation has a close report to that of Victoria and Ellen; Youth ages 8-18 spend approximately 6.5 hours each day using media, an activity that far surpasses the time they spend with parents, doing homework or playing sports (Roberts & Foehr, 2005).

Similarly, Sanders reports that the “average child,” between the ages of six and eighteen, will have spent 4,000 hours listening to radio and CDs, watched 16,000 hours of television, and watched several thousand more hours of movies (Sanders, 1994). This report is an indication that children will spend more time with the media than with their parents or in the classroom. These reports are similar to the one recorded by Olusola and Kehinde in Nigeria. According to them, as at the year 2014, 57% of the population of children in Western Nigeria watch television cartoons everyday while 24% watch them 3 times a week and 19% watch them once a week. A higher percentage of (Nigerian kids) watch TV cartoon every day, and that, (66%) of the children watch cartoon for about 1 to three hours a week (p. 13). The studies of Victoria and Ellen, Sanders, and Olusola and Kehinde cited above focused mostly on the time children spent watching rather than the content of the media they watch.

Another dimension that needs to be considered is age. The effects of media usage on children also vary based on their age. Children who are exposed to media use from a very tender age may be more affected than children who are not. For example, Anderson and Huston (2001) assert that young ones (0-6 years) are more open to the dangers of the media. They explained that children between birth and ‘early’ school age may be the most vulnerable to certain negative effects of media use such as obesity, aggression, fear, and sleep disturbances. Also, the American Academy of Pediatrics in 2001 states that the risks of infants using media outweigh the benefits and thus recommend against screen media use for children zero to two years of age. Research evidence linking media exposure to a variety of health risks from obesity to violent behaviour also exists (Bushman & Huesmann, 2001; Kaiser Family

Foundation, 2004). The AAP also recommends that children two years of age and older be limited to one to two hours of electronic entertainment per day; this probably is as a result of its positive effect on these young ones (American Academy of Pediatrics, 1999). Despite the attention the AAP policy received from the press and the public, some parents have ignored the warnings and further recommend, allow and even encourage their very young children to use screen media (Rideout, 2004; Vandewater & Wartella, 2003). These parents think that television programmes and film animations, “mostly help” rather than “mostly hurts” (Rideout & Wartella, 2003). Some of the media, programmes, and films children are exposed to have been reported to have negative values such as violence, aggressive behaviours, and disrespect to parents or adults, which has to a certain extent influenced behaviours of the young generation today.

Various researches have shown that a child could be influenced by listening to and watching animated stories (Mahar, 2003; Frey & Fisher, 2004). The influences which could either be positive or negative are also depended on the content viewed. Adam (1999), relates that many movies from Disney Studio and other production houses had influenced children negatively in certain aspects, such as smoking and alcohol abuse. From a review of 40 selected studies on smoking in movies, Haydon showed that Smoking in movies increases adolescent smoking initiation. Exposure to movie smoking makes viewers' attitudes and beliefs about smoking and smokers more favourable and has a dose-response relationship with adolescent smoking behaviour (Haydon, 2006). One pertinent thing to note is that characters who engage in smoking are generally the bad guys and not the good guys in the movies and the bad guys are most time violent in the films.

Further, there are quite some children’s animated television series that is based on superheroes stories involving violence and fighting scenes. Children exposure to such scenes could convey wrong ideas that a problem can be solved through aggression because children tend to imitate what they see and hear, including those images that they are exposed to from television. Also, Haninger (2004) pointed out that “Violence presented on screens such as movies or video games could lead to children’s belief that being aggressive is a good way to get what they want”.

Additional, researches since the 1970s as noted above show that television violence can affect children and encourage the development of aggressive behaviour and attitudes (Murray 1995). According to Gerbner and Cross (1980), by the time the average American child graduates from high school, they will have seen more than 13.000 violent deaths on television. Some of those violent scenes are first seen by children in cartoon films. This applies virtually to all countries as well as Nigeria- especially areas with large populations like Lagos, Ibadan, and Delta State among other places. Bushman and Huesmann (2001) also extend this by stating that by the time the average American child graduates from elementary school, they will have seen more than 8.000 murders and more than 100.000 other acts of violence on television.

Tiffany and Alex, (2008), observe however that the numbers are higher for those children with access to cable television. Cantor comparatively writes that “the most direct and obvious way in which viewing violence contributes to violent behaviour is through imitation or social learning.” He further adds that there is a wealth of psychological research demonstrating that learning often occurs through imitation, and, of course, most parents know that children imitate televised words and actions from an early age. Because most children are so fully immersed in our media culture, it is usually difficult to link a

specific media programme to a specific harmful outcome, even though some similarities between media scenarios and subsequent acts seem too close to be considered coincidences. The Kaiser Family Foundation also presents specific researches on media violence on children as follows:

Three to five-year-old boys randomly assigned to watch violent Superman or Batman cartoons at their nursery school once a day, three days a week, for four weeks, were more aggressive and less cooperative during a social interaction test situation than three to five-year-old boys who were randomly assigned to watch Mister Rogers' Neighbourhood during the same four week period (Friedrich & Stein, 1973).

Preschool boys who watched a 3-minute film depicting aggressive play with a clown interacted more aggressively with the clown from the film during free play immediately after viewing. Boys in pairs acted more aggressively than boys alone, suggesting that imitation of modeled aggressive behaviour may increase when children play in pairs (Drabman & Thomas, 1977).

Five to 12-year-old boys who watched less than four hours of television per week were more aroused (as measured by galvanic skin response and change in blood volume) by viewing media violence than boys who watched more than 25 hours per week, suggesting heavy viewers had been desensitized by prior media violence exposure (Croft & Courier, 1973)

The above researches showed that when children are exposed to violent movies and cartoon films, they tend to copy whatever they have watched with their friends. It also means that children learn their attitude about violence at a very young age and these attitudes extend into their adulthood. From media violence, children learn to behave aggressively toward others. They are thought to use violence instead of self-control to take care of problems or conflict. Violence in the media world may make children more accepting of real-world violence and less caring toward others. Children who see a lot of violence in movies or television shows or video games may become fearful and look at the real world as a mean and scary place. The American Psychological Association (1999) submits that for some children, the effect of the violence they are exposed to in the media is not exhibited immediately but until their teen or young-adult years.

2. Data Presentation

Table 1. Age

Age Distribution of caregivers	Frequency	%
24 years and below	6	11
25-44 Years	17	30
45 years and above	34	60

Table one shows the distribution of caregivers. An insignificant 6 of 11% are caregivers below 24 years of age. 17 of 30% fall between 25-44 years while the greater percentage of 34 of 60% is above. The high number of respondents being from 45 years and above shows experience in parenthood and caregiving.

Table 2. Marital status

Sex	Frequency	%
Married	45	79
Divorced	3	5
Separated	7	12
Widow	2	4
Total	57	100

Table 2 above shows that majority of the guardian who responded to the question takes care of their children as a couple. 45 of 79% are married. Insignificant 3 of 5% are devoiced, 7 of 12% are separated and insignificant 2 of 4% are widowed. The table shows that the combined number of those devoiced, separated, and widowed are also insignificant when compared to the 45 who are collectively taking care of their children.

Table 3. Religion

Religion	Frequency	%
Christainity	44	77
Islam	7	12
Traditional	3	5
Non	3	5
Total	57	99

All religious groups and those not associating with any religion are represented in this table. The highest number of respondents representing a total of 44 (77%) fellowship as Christians. 7 of 12% are Islams. The remaining 10% of the total respondents are shared equally with traditional African worshipers and those who do not worship at all. This is evidence of a good spread of questioner

Table 4

Which geopolitical zoon are you	Frequency	%
North Central	8	14
North East	9	16
North West	8	14
South West	7	12
South East	8	14
South South	17	30
Total	57	100

The six geopolitical zones of the country are well represented. South-south has the highest number of respondents of 17 of 30% respondents this could be because the research is carried out in the region. Northeast closes the gap with 9 respondents of 16%. Northcentral, Northwest, and Southeast have 8 of 14% respondents each. Southwest has the lowest number of respondents of 7 of 12%. The close margins between respondents of each region show widespread of the questioner. Married women who responded to this question claims husband’s geopolitical zone.

Table 5. Media using

Which of the following do you have?	Frequency	%
Television (Cable)	56	98
Smart phone	57	100
Video player (VCD/DVD)	55	96
Video game	41	71
Total	57	

Table 5 shows the source from which children watch films. Of the 57 respondents, 56 say they have cable television (DS TV, GO TV, etc). All 57 say they have smartphones that can play mp4 videos. 55 numbers have VCD or DVD. While 41 respondents say they have video games.

Table 6. Permission to use media

Do you allow your children to watch and use media with you?	Frequency	%
Yes	57	100
No	-	-
Total	57	100

All responded positively to the question in table 6 Their response to the question shows that parent and caregivers do not chase their children away whenever they use media. It also shows that whatever content they see the children are also exposed to it

Table 7. Permission to use media alone

Do you allow your children to watch and use media alone?	Frequency	%
Yes	51	72
No	6	11
Total	57	83

Significantly, 72% of 41 numbers of respondents allow children use media alone. An insignificant 6 of 11% do not.

Table 8. Content of media

Do you know the content of what they watch when alone?	Frequency	%
Yes	8	14
No	49	86
Total	57	100

The table shows that insignificant 8 respondents of 14% care about what the media feeds their children with. They do not give them free hands to watch whatever they like. While significant 49 of 86% do not know the content of the films their children are feed with.

Table 9. Selection of games and films

Are you selective of the games and films you watch with them?	Frequency	%
Yes	21	37
No	36	63
Total	57	100

Greater number of respondents 63% of 36 respondents are not selective of films and games contents while watching with them. Only 21 of 37% say they are selective.

Table 10. Forbidden brands

If you are selective of the games and films you watch with them, which brand do you not allow them to watch with you?	Frequency	%
Films with adult scenes	21	100
Films with mystical contents	3	14
Films with fighting scenes	7	33
Total	57	

Table 10 is an extension of table 9 where 21 numbers of respondents say they allow their children to watch with them. This table shows film and game content caregivers do not allow their children to see when they are around with them. All 21 of 100% who responded positively to the question on table 9 says they do not allow children to watch films with adult content. An insignificant 3 of 14% will not allow children to watch mystical contents films while 7 of 33% do not allow them to watch violent scenes. The response shows partial parental guidance. Parents care more about the adult content effect on their children than violence or other vices

Table 11. Interests in games and films

Which of the following do your children like watching?	Frequency	%
Comedy films	4	7
Adventure Films	5	9
Chinese Films/ video games	41	54
War films/ video games	32	74
Films with mystical contents	12	21
Films/ games with educational contents	23	40
Total	57	

The table above shows children's interest in films and games genres. 4 of 7% have very little interest in comedy. 5 of 9% likes adventure films. 31 of 54% likes Chinese films and games.

42 of 74% like to engage themselves with war films and video games. 12 of 21% enjoys watching the film with mystical contents. 23 of 40% like watching films and playing games with educational; content. The responses show that children who like comedy, adventures mystical, and educational content may still be liking films and games with violent content like Chinese and war films and games.

Table 12. Effects on behaviours

Do you think that the films affect the child's behavior?	Frequency	%
Yes	57	100
No	-	-
Total	57	100

All respondents to the question in table 12 agree that the media have tremendous effects on children's behaviour.

Table 13. Imitation of behaviours

Has there been a time your children imitate what they watch?	Frequency	%
Yes	57	100
No	-	-
Total	57	100

Like table 12 above, all caregivers answers yes to the question on table 12 children are good imitators. They copy what they see in the media.

If Yes, State the Instance

- Always stage fight with peers using sticks as guns and spears.
- Behave rude to elders
- Speak like the character they like
- Walk and carry the charisma of the superhero
- Jump from the bed to floor and back
- Want to always carry protective equipment
- Behave very romantic
- Always want to kiss

Table 14. Violence in media

Do you think violence in the media will make children act violently in the future?	Frequency	%
Yes	41	71
No	16	28
Total	57	99

The greater percentage of those who responded to the question believes that the media can affect children. While 16 of 28% believe the effect is momentous.

3. Summary of Findings

This study is on the influence of viewing media violence on the child and the Nigerian environment. The questionnaire designed, sent out, and returned were analysed to ascertain the present and possible future effects of media violence on children. The questionnaire focuses on parents and caregivers. Those who responded to the questions are male and female above the age of 24 years. The respondents were either married, divorced, widowed, or separated. However, the majority who responded to the questions are married. The six geopolitical zones namely North Central (NC) North East (NE), North West (NW), South West (SW), South East (SE), South-South (SS) were all represented. Members of all religions and those who do not belong to any recognized religious group are also represented. There is at least a television set, a video player, and a smartphone in the homes of all respondents. Some have the combination of cable television, smartphone, video player, and a video game player in their houses. This shows multiple sources from which children watch films. While all respondents allow their children to use media with them, only 6 out of 57 respondents would not allow children to use media alone. 49 numbers do not know what their children watch while alone. This statistic is insignificant and it shows a lack of parental guidance. Children are not helped to understand and see violent imagery that is appropriate to their developmental level. The 21 number who use media with their children care more about preventing children from watching films or playing games with adult content than those with violent and mystical content. Caregivers also confirm in table 11 that children like playing games and watching films with violent scenes than those with educational content. The response to the oral question shows that children below 6 love educational media while those above 7 prefer violent games and films. Children's behaviour after watching violent films makes them imitate the superheroes in the films. They always stage fight with peers using sticks as guns and spears, jump from the bed to floor and back, and always carry protective equipment. This indicates and corresponds to the response in table 14 where 41 out of the 57 say the media violence will have a future effect on them. These poses on caregivers the need to be more aware of the risks associated with children viewing violent imagery as it promotes aggressive attitudes and antisocial behaviour now and in the future.

Children, like adults, enjoy themselves with media. The media entertains them but the effect on them is not only momentous but extends well into the future which may pose great harm to society. Azigbo, a parent who is interviewed said, “the future of children is in the hands of parents. The more they care less, the more they involve in violent media; the more their future is jeopardized. Between 0-16 years is the best time for caregivers to be observant of the programs children watch especially when alone. A single mother whose name is Agnes emphatically asserts: “I do not leave my kids to use media the way they like, no matter how young you may think they are, they learn violence from the films and carry out the same actions with their friends, especially at school”. She continues that; “my son has injured his classmate while playing horseplay. I spent lots of money treating the injured child”. When asked where she thinks her son learns the horseplay from, she says “from Chinese films”. Her statements show that caregiver's negligence of children watching violent films causes damages to others hence caregivers should not always leave them to use media on their own. Children at a tender age need parental guidance. They need someone who will explain to them that the people who were stabbed and shot do not die in real life. Also, the stunts and jumps are computer-generated. Ogodo, the father of two

whose children uses media has this to say: "we parent should not leave smartphones with our children without close monitoring. While with them, it is good that we change to another channel when violent and adult contents appear. Even with the closest monitoring, they still have to go to school where they will mingle with other children. What is essential according to Idris a father of four children, is to monitor and know the closest friend of the child and his or her play mate. It might be that parent of the child's play mate does not give proper guidance to him or her. Therefore, he might infect the child with his awful play. When you notice that, it is best to stop the child from being friends with such a friend. A respondent who gave her name mama Okafor says that the rate at which people kill in films these days is too much. They are spoiling the children for us. When asked if she does not guide her child, she continues. How can I guide my daughter when I go to the market every day to look for what we will eat? She goes to school and when she returns, I will not be at home at that time, she watches anything from our GO TV. I am so worried about the future of these children. At 13 years, she fights her friends like a man. She is ready to injure whomever she is fighting with, with whatever physical property she sees around at that moment. She sees nothing wrong with using anything within her reach to fight. This thing pains me" mama Okafor concludes.

4. Conclusion

Children learn both the good and the bad from media. In the area of education, for example, children learn to read and write, speak good English, solve mathematical problems and can mention names of certain places and animals, learning to work as a team, and learning better ways of dressing. These are good morals (Adjeketa, 2016). However, bullying is among the conduct children learn. Fighting is a violent act and as confirmed from the study, children learn lots of violent acts from the media. If not properly guided, poses a threat not only to others, but to themselves, and society.

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