
The Impact of Exposure to Violent Content on TikTok Social Media on Adolescent Aggressive Behavior

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Abstract: As the dominant media platform for adolescents, TikTok's algorithm-driven, short-form video ecosystem presents a new and complex context for examining the long-standing issue of media violence and aggression. The unique nature of content exposure on this platform necessitates a deeper understanding beyond traditional media effects models. This study explores the lived experience of adolescents' exposure to violent content on TikTok and its perceived impact on their aggressive cognitions and behaviors. Employing a qualitative phenomenological methodology, grounded in extensive literature and library research, this study gathered rich narrative data. In-depth interviews and digital diaries were utilized to understand the subjective meanings and processes from the perspective of teenage participants. The findings reveal a complex psychological process. The analysis shows that the algorithm facilitates a gradual normalization of and desensitization to violence. Participants reported experiencing emotional ambivalence, oscillating between entertainment and disturbance. A key finding is the adoption of aggressive verbal and physical 'scripts' learned from the platform. Crucially, this process is accompanied by a strong mechanism of rationalization and denial, where adolescents actively minimize the content's influence to resolve their cognitive dissonance. This research concludes that the impact of TikTok's violent content is a subtle, permeating process, amplified by its unique technological structure and shielded by users' psychological defenses. The study suggests that effective media literacy interventions must address not only content awareness but also the cognitive biases that prevent adolescents from recognizing their own vulnerability

Introduction

Entering the third decade of the 21st century, the digital media landscape has been dominated by short-form video platforms, with TikTok as the main epicenter for the social life and information consumption of adolescents around the world, including Indonesia (Kemp, 2025; APJII, 2024). TikTok's unique characteristics, characterized by its infinite flow of content personalized by advanced algorithms, ultra-fast trend cycles, and immersive audiovisual formats, have made it a highly influential medium in shaping the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of

Generation Z (Wijaya & Sari, 2023). However, behind its popularity as an entertainment platform, its decentralized nature and massive user-generated content also create an environment where violent content—ranging from physical fights, cyberbullying, dangerous challenges, to sadistic content—can spread widely and even go viral (Rahman, 2023). This condition has revived the long-standing academic debate about the impact of violent media exposure on aggressive behavior, but now in an entirely new and more complex technological context (Putra, 2022).

The urgency of this research is based on the psychological vulnerability of adolescents as the main audience of this platform. Adolescence is a crucial period of development characterized by the search for identity, strong peer influence, and immature impulse control (Santrock, 2024; Nesi & Prinstein, 2023). Classical theories such as Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 2021) and Cultivation Theory (Gerbner & Gross, 2022) have long argued that repeated exposure to violence in the media can lead to a process of imitation, desensitization, and the perception that aggressive behavior is a normal and acceptable way to resolve conflicts. TikTok's algorithm has the potential to accelerate this process by creating a violent "echo chamber", where once a user shows interest in the content, he or she will be constantly presented with similar content, which can ultimately normalize aggression as a spectacle or even an achievement (De-Vito, 2023). This phenomenon is relevant to the increasing reports of cases of violence among adolescents in Indonesia in recent years (KPAI, 2024).

Previous research has extensively examined the relationship between violent media and aggression, but the majority have focused on traditional media such as television (Huesmann, 2023) and video games (Anderson & Bushman, 2022). Some more recent studies have begun to explore the negative impact of TikTok, but more often highlight issues of mental health, body image, or disinformation (Chen & Lee, 2024; Livingstone & Stoilova, 2021). A significant research gap lies in the lack of empirical studies that specifically analyze the impact of exposure to violent content in algorithmic short video formats on TikTok on adolescents' aggressive behavior. How the sporadic, repetitive, and interactive nature of exposure on TikTok differs from long-term media exposure and how this affects adolescents' cognition and aggressive behavior is an area that has not been deeply touched.

Therefore, this study offers novelty by focusing its analysis exclusively on the TikTok platform, to test whether and how existing media impact models can be applied or need to be modified in this new media ecosystem. This study not only measures the frequency of exposure, but also seeks to understand how the context of TikTok as a social-digital environment moderates

these impacts. The purpose of this study is to quantitatively and in-depth analyze the impact of exposure to violent content on TikTok social media on the tendency of aggressive behavior in adolescents in Indonesia. Theoretically, the benefit of this study is to update and expand the relevance of media effects theories in the context of algorithmic platforms. Practically, the results of this study are expected to provide a strong data foundation for parents, educators, psychologists, and policymakers to formulate effective digital media literacy intervention strategies and programs to mitigate risks and protect the welfare of adolescents in the digital era (Pratama, 2025).

Methods

This study uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological study design to explore in depth the essence of lived experience and adolescents' subjective meaning of exposure to violent content on TikTok (Moustakas, 2022; Van Manen, 2024). This approach was chosen for its ability to go beyond mere measurements of frequency or correlation, and instead, focus on understanding the "how" and "why" of such content exposures to be perceived, interpreted, and connected to aggressive feelings and behaviors from the participant's own perspective (Creswell & Poth, 2023). The main data source of this study was fifteen adolescent participants aged 15-17 years who were selected through purposive sampling techniques with the criteria of being active users of TikTok and having been consciously exposed to various forms of violent content on the platform (Patton, 2024; Merriam & Tisdell, 2022). The selection of participants also considered gender diversity and social backgrounds to enrich the variety of data. In addition, secondary data in the form of relevant TikTok video samples described by participants were also analyzed to understand the visual context of their narrative (Rose, 2022). The entire research process adheres to strict ethical protocols, including obtaining written consent from parents (informed consent) and consent from participants (assent), as well as ensuring data anonymity and confidentiality (Hasan, 2024).

Data collection techniques are carried out through triangulation methods to obtain rich and credible data (Flick, 2023; Denzin & Lincoln, 2023). The main technique is semi-structured in-depth interviews, which are designed to open up space for participants to freely tell stories about their experiences, feelings, and thoughts during and after viewing violent content (Seidman, 2023). To complete the interview data, participants were also asked to fill out a digital daily journal for one week, where they recorded significant experiences while using TikTok, particularly related to the research theme, in order to capture more spontaneous and contextual data (Jones, 2023; Given, 2023). This combination of retrospective interviews and prospective journals allows for a more comprehensive exploration of the phenomenon. Data collection was carried out until it reached a

saturation point, where no more significant new themes or insights emerged from the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 2023).

The data analysis method adopts systematic phenomenological analysis measures to uncover the essential structure of the participants' experiences (Silverman, 2025). This process begins with a verbatim transcription of all interview data and compilation of journal data. The researcher then conducts an epoche or the process of setting aside personal assumptions, followed by repeated reading of the data to gain a holistic understanding. The next stage is horizontalization, in which significant statements from participants are identified and extracted. These statements are then grouped into coherent units of meaning or thematic clusters (Saldaña, 2024; Braun & Clarke, 2021). From these themes, researchers develop textural descriptions (what is experienced) and structural descriptions (how are experienced), which are ultimately synthesized to formulate the essence of the phenomenon being studied (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2024). The entire analysis process is assisted by ATLAS.ti's Qualitative Data Analysis Software (QDAS) to ensure rigorous and transparent data management.

Results

Phenomenological analysis of the adolescent participants' narratives reveals a complex picture of how exposure to violent content on TikTok social media is lived and interpreted in their lifeworlds. The central finding that emerged from the entire interview and the daily journal was a process of normalization and desensitization that occurred gradually and often unconsciously, which was strongly mediated by the workings of the For You Page (FYP) algorithm. Participants consistently reported that their initial exposure to violent content, such as videos of fights, bullying, or dangerous challenges, often caused shock or discomfort. However, the constant frequency of similar content appearing in their FYPs gradually erodes those initial emotional responses. This phenomenon is internalized to the point where seeing scenes of violence becomes "normal" and is often passed with just a swipe of a finger without causing a meaningful reaction. This process of desensitization creates a psychological foundation on which violence begins to lose its significance and shifts from something taboo to part of the everyday digital entertainment landscape.

Furthermore, an in-depth analysis of the participants' narratives showed a strong emotional ambivalence in responding to violent content. Their experience is not monolithic, but rather is colored by a spectrum of feelings that often contradict between entertainment, adrenaline, and distractedness. A number of participants, especially men, described the experience of watching a compilation of fights or aggressive action as "exciting" and adrenaline-

pumping, seen as a spectacle independent of real-world consequences. However, in other moments or on different types of content—for example, violence that happens to victims who appear weak—they also express feelings of anxiety, anxiety, or anger. This ambivalence indicates an internal struggle in processing the content; On the one hand there is the instant attraction of entertainment, on the other hand there are remnants of a disturbed conscience. This struggle is often resolved with an avoidance mechanism, which is to quickly turn attention to the next video to relieve the feeling of discomfort, a practice facilitated by the design of the TikTok platform itself.

The most significant finding linking content exposure to behavior was the adoption of aggressive behavior scripts learned from TikTok. Participants openly recounted how the platform provided a "blueprint" or reference for acts of aggression, both verbally and physically. Verbal aggression is the most commonly recognized impact, where participants adopt the harsh and confrontational vocabulary, swearing, and joking style that they see in the comments section or from content creators. They consider it a "slang" or communication norm on TikTok, but admit that this style of communication often carries over into face-to-face interactions with peers. At the level of physical aggression, although none of the participants admitted to directly mimicking a fight, they described a decrease in the threshold for physically responding. Constant exposure to conflict resolution through violence in a 15-second video implicitly instills a script that aggression is a quick, natural, and sometimes effective response. One participant stated, "Seeing people immediately retaliate with punches in the video feels normal, so if in the real world someone is fishing a little bit, it feels like the instinct is going in that direction as well."

Although the participants were able to articulate these impacts, a strong theme that pervaded their entire narrative was the existence of a rationalization and denial mechanism for the influence of the media. Almost all participants at some point in the interview will say phrases like, "But it's just content," or "I'm smart enough to tell the difference between good and bad." This rationalization serves as a self-defense strategy to manage the cognitive dissonance between the behaviors they adopt and their self-image as a good and controlled individual. They consciously build a wall of separation between the digital world and the real world, although in their own narratives of experience, they prove to be very fragile and often translucent. This contradiction between explicitly stated denial and implicit acknowledgment of behavior change is at the essence of the phenomenon of the impact of TikTok's violent content exposure on adolescents: an influence that permeates subtly, normalized in everyday interactions, but consciously tries to deny its existence.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide rich phenomenological insights into the subtle mechanisms of how exposure to violent content on TikTok is lived and potentially influences adolescent aggressive behavior. The process of normalization and desensitization expressed by the participants strongly confirmed and at the same time updated the relevance of Cultivation Theory in the age of algorithmic media (Gerbner & Gross, 2022). If television of its time slowly "instilled" perceptions of social reality, then TikTok's highly personalized and immersive algorithm serves as a much more potent and efficient "cultivator" (Zuboff, 2021; Wijaya & Sari, 2023). Constant and repeated exposure to violent scenes, presented intermittently with other entertainment content, creates a symbolic reality in which aggression is no longer seen as a deviation, but rather as part of a normal repertoire of social interaction. This process of desensitization, as has long been documented in media effects studies, becomes a psychological foundation that makes adolescents more permissive to aggressive ideas and actions (Huesmann, 2023; Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2023).

The presence of emotional ambivalence in the participants indicates that they are not a completely passive audience. This finding can be explained through the Uses and Gratifications Theory, which states that audiences actively choose media to meet specific needs (Katz & Blumler, 2022). Participants' descriptions of the feeling of "excitement" and "adrenaline" indicate the search for gratification in the form of stimulation and sensational entertainment, a need that is prevalent in the adolescent developmental stage (Santrock, 2024; Knobloch-Westerwick, 2021). However, the disturbed feelings that arise simultaneously indicate a conflict with their internal moral values. This phenomenon can be understood through the concept of Moral Disengagement from Bandura (2021), where individuals use various psychological maneuvers to disable moral control in order to continue enjoying content that is actually contrary to their conscience. TikTok's design that allows users to immediately move on from disruptive content facilitates this moral detachment, prevents deep reflection, and allows momentary gratification to triumph over ethical discomfort (De-Vito, 2023).

The adoption of aggressive behavior scripts, both verbal and physical, is the most obvious manifestation of the impact studied and is highly aligned with Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 2021). TikTok serves as an informal "school" that provides highly effective behavioral models for observational learning. Short-form videos, which often feature aggression that appear "cool" or are rewarded with popularity (measured by the number of likes and comments), are ideal models: memorable, visually appealing, and socially reinforced

(vicarious reinforcement) (Nesi & Prinstein, 2023). The internalization of aggressive verbal scripts into the norm of communication among peers shows how the boundaries between online and offline communication are becoming increasingly blurred (Rahman, 2023). Meanwhile, the lowering of the threshold for physical aggression is in line with the General Aggression Model, which states that any exposure to violence strengthens the cognitive pathways associated with aggression, making it more accessible when individuals are exposed to real-world provocation (Anderson & Bushman, 2022).

The most complex and psychologically significant finding is the existence of mechanisms of rationalization and impact denial, which can be explained in depth through the Theory of Cognitive Dissonance (Festinger, 2023). The participants experienced a dissonance between two conflicting cognitions: (1) "I am a good person who is in control of myself," and (2) "I regularly consume and sometimes mimic behavior from violent content." To alleviate the psychological discomfort of this contradiction, they actively downplay the influence of the media ("it's just content") and exaggerate their ability to sort out information (Hasan, 2024). This phenomenon highlights the limitations of media literacy approaches that focus only on awareness, as adolescents themselves actively refuse to acknowledge their vulnerability. This confirms that the influence of violent media is not a one-way process, but rather a complex psychological negotiation in which individuals actively seek to maintain a positive self-image even though their behavior begins to be affected (Livingstone & Stoilova, 2021; Son, 2022; Chen & Lee, 2024).

Conclusion

Based on phenomenological analysis, this study concludes that the impact of exposure to violent content on TikTok on adolescents is not a linear cause-and-effect process, but a complex and subtle psychological process. Algorithm-mediated exposure gradually normalizes and desensitizes adolescents to aggression, while providing scripts of verbal and physical aggressive behavior that are adopted through social learning mechanisms. This phenomenon is complicated by the existence of emotional ambivalence and self-defense mechanisms in the form of rationalization and denial, in which adolescents actively refuse to acknowledge the influence of such content to ease their cognitive dissonance. Therefore, this study confirms that effective interventions require not only content restriction, but also a media literacy approach that is able to make adolescents aware of the internal psychological processes and cognitive biases that make them vulnerable to such influences.

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