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บทบรรยายต่อไป
Fright Reactions to Media Coverage: Development Differences among Children

Vikanda Pornsakulvanich

Abstract

News coverage presentations of dangers, disasters, accidents, or some televised fictional and fantasy films can evoke fear to many viewers, especially young children. Children perceive, understand, and interpret media contents differently. These differences reflect their emotional reactions to what they see and hear. The exposure to media-induced fear and violence can lead to an immediate emotional response, which creates short-term effects or can lead to more stable, long-term effects such as a fear of victimization and crime. This paper seeks to present the effects of media-induced fear on children, to summarize previous and contemporary studies relating to children's fright reactions to media content, and to provide recommendations for future studies.

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Introduction

International news coverage of the horrifying events such as a Massacre at Virginia Tech, 2007, the Asia's Tsunami disaster, 2004, and the U.S. September 11, 2001 may induce fear among people around the world, especially young children. Repeated frightening television news coverage and some televised films can be viewed as a media-induced fear and violence. The exposure of media violence can lead to aggressive behavior, emotional desensitization, and fright reaction (Gunter, 1994). This paper aims to present the effects of media-induced fear on children, to summarize previous and contemporary studies relating to developmental differences of children's fright reactions to media exposure, and to provide recommendations for future research.

Causes of Fear

Cantor (1994) presented 3 categories of stimuli that produce real life fear (a) dangers and injuries such as natural disasters, attacks, violent encounters, and nuclear accidents, (b) distortions of natural forms such as vampires, monsters, and mummies, and (c) the experience of jeopardy and fright by others.

The perception of dangers can induce fear when injuries are observed. Additionally, observing other people's responses to dangers can evoke fear (Cantor, 1994). Examples of news coverage presentations of dangers and disasters in the World Trade Center attack in 2001, the Asia's Tsunami disaster in 2004, and the Hurricane Katrina disaster in 2005, evoked fear in many viewers in a way that media depicted losses and injuries of incidents and viewers observed and experienced other people's fear as a response to dangers. In addition, televised fictional and fantasy films that present distortions of natural forms can induce fear in children (Cantor, 1994). Distorted characters in films such as Vampires stimulated fear in children in laboratory experiments (Spark & Cantor, 1986).

The exposure to media-induced fear or violence can lead to an immediate emotional response such as viewing horror film which creates relatively short-term effects (Cantor, 1994). Nevertheless, it can lead to more stable, long-term effects such as a fear of victimization and crime (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980).

The long-term effects on the exposure of media violence can be viewed as a cultivation effect. Cultivation theory posits that effects of the exposure of television on viewers' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors were cumulative, extensive, continuing, and stabilizing. Exposure to media violence can cultivate fear in viewers, particularly heavy viewers. Gerbner et al. (1980) explained that heavy viewers were more likely to experience the real world as a mean and scary place than were light viewers. More specifically, heavy viewers who lived in a high crime rate city tended to experience greater effects of television messages.

However, some media-induced fear effects produce immediate emotional responses in the viewers, especially in children. The immediate emotional responses of frightening media presentations are relatively short-term effects which involve anxiety, misery, and physical arousal transitory. Nevertheless, these responses may continue for several hours, days, weeks, or longer (Cantor, 1994).
Developmental Differences: Age and Gender

Many investigations of children’s fright reactions to media violence were studied by Joanne Cantor. According to Cantor (1994), developmental differences influence children reactions to media presentations. Children perceive, understand, and interpret stimuli differently. These differences reflect their emotional reactions to what they see and hear. Therefore, children at different levels of development display different emotional reactions to the same media.

Cantor (1994) reported that children respond differently to the depictions of realistic threats and fictional threats. Realistic threats induced more fearfully than fictional threats. In particular, older children were likely to develop more fear to the realistic depictions than younger children. Cantor and Sparks (1984) found that elementary school children tended to be more frightened of realistic depictions than did preschool children.

Moreover, children's age is an important variable for understanding media-induced fear reactions. The effects of frightening media presentations produced different emotional responses in children of different age. Younger children reacted more severely to visual media depictions, whereas older children reacted more severely to abstract concepts (Cantor, 1994).

Developmental differences not only reveal to what extent children react to media-induced fears but they also affect the way in which children deal with those fears (Valkenburg, Cantor, & Peeters, 2000). As Cantor (1994) noted, cognitive strategies involve complex mental functions, whereas noncognitive strategies involve more automatic and physical functions. More specifically, cognitive strategies refer to verbalizations or thought patterns used to react to the stimulus such as saying that “it is just a movie and could not happen in the real life.” Noncognitive strategies refer to actions not involving thought processes with the purpose of shifting attention away from the stimulus such as leaving the room or covering the eyes when exposing to certain television contents (Harrison & Cantor, 1999). Cantor (1994) concluded, “In general, preschool children benefit more from “noncognitive” than from “cognitive strategies”; both cognitive and noncognitive strategies can be effective for older elementary school children, although this age group tends to prefer cognitive strategies” (p. 235).

Another factor that is useful to understand fright reactions to media depiction is gender differences. LaFrance and Banaji (1992) suggested that girls were more likely to reveal fears than were boys. Van Der Molen, Valkenburg, and Peeters (2005) examined children’s fright reactions to a particular news contents such as interpersonal violence, accidents, and disasters. They found that girls more often reported fear when watching these news contents than did boys. In addition, Hoffer (1995) reported, when coping with fright, girls used more noncognitive strategies than boys, whereas there were no gender differences in using cognitive strategies. Hoffer pointed out that boys generally were less likely to reveal their emotions than were girls. Thus, they were less likely to use noncognitive strategies which were visually apparent to others.

In fact, the results imply the role of gender differences and the willingness to express emotions. Social expectation might be one of the factors that boys are less likely to express their emotions to the
public. Generally, it is more acceptable for females to express their emotions such as crying or screaming in the public than for males. It is possible that boys may be afraid of the frightening films or certain news programs. However, they may be less willing to express their emotions than do girls because of being afraid of social judgment. It is not surprising that noncognitive strategies are less likely to be used as a coping strategy among boys than among girls.

**Studies of Media-Induced Fear to Children**

Most empirical evidence on children's fright reactions to media contents has been conducted in the United States and European countries. There are a limited number of studies conducting in Thailand (e.g., Chanwisate, 2003; Rarueysong, 1991; Waiwattanakorn, 1999). These studies examined the relationship between media exposure and news coverage in general and did not emphasized children's fright reactions to media coverage. Thus, studies relating to fright reactions to media contents among children in the United States and European countries will be focused in this paper.

Several studies investigated children's fright reactions to televised programs (e.g., Cantor & Hoffner, 1990; Cantor, Mares, & Oliver, 1993; Cantor & Nathanson, 1996; Cantor & Omdahl, 1991; Smith & Wilson, 2002; Valkenburg et al., 2000; and Van Der Molen et al., 2005). One study measured children's emotional reactions to news coverage presentations of the Gulf War (Cantor et al., 1998). Parents were asked to rate their children's reactions to the news coverage. The results showed that 25% of parents spontaneously mentioned that televised war coverage inducing fear to their child, 8% of their child had bad dreams, and 18% of the children had disturbed sleeping patterns.

In addition, they found different fear reactions among different age groups of children. Children in the younger groups responded to visual presentation and to direct effects of war more severely than those in the older groups, whereas children in the older groups responded to issues of politics and global disaster more intensely than those in the younger groups. One important finding from this study was that they found no indication of desensitization of television-induced fear of war. This implies that American children are more or less affected or fearful by televised news depicting the threats and disaster of the war. Possibly, young children may not be able to differentiate the fact or the fiction of the news contents. Also, the agenda setting of news media that repeatedly depicted the threats of the war may inevitably induce fear to young children.

Consistent to Cantor et al. (1993), Smith and Moyer-Gusser (2006) studied children's fright reactions to the War on Iraq and found that young children were more likely to be frightened by concrete and visual presentation than were older children. On the other hand, older children were more likely to be scared by abstract and verbally communicated threats than were young children.

Another study measured children's fright reactions to particular news (Cantor & Nathanson, 1996). The results showed that 43% of children reported having been frightened by something on television. Children did experience fear from televised news coverage. The most frequent content stories using fright reactions to news coverage were stories about violence between strangers, war and
famine, and natural disasters. Also, Smith and Wilson (2002) reported that children could recall and explain news stories that made them feel upset.

Valkenburg et al. (2000) examined the effects of television-induced fear reactions among children in the Netherlands. The results showed that 31% of Dutch children were reported as having been frightened by something on television. Younger children experienced more fear to fantasy depictions than did older children. Additionally, girls reported having been more intensely frightened by televised depictions than did boys. As confirmed in Hoffner’s study (1995) on gender differences in using coping strategies, the results revealed that girls were more likely to use noncognitive strategies than were boys, whereas there was no difference in using cognitive strategies between genders.

Cantor and Omdahl (1991) examined children’s emotional reactions to fictional televised depiction of real-life threats. They found that children experienced fright and negative emotional reactions when exposed to threatening programs, and had mild emotional responses when exposed to harmless televised programs. Also, children who were exposed to a particular threat rated similar threats as more likely to happen than children who were not exposed to that threat.

Another study measured children’s fright reactions to televised films (Cantor & Hoffner, 1990). The results revealed that children’s fear reactions were correlated with their perceptions of the proximity of media depicted threats. Children who perceived that a threat was near their locations revealed more severe fear than those who did not.

In sum, results of developmental differences in children’s fright reactions have shown that experiencing fright reactions to news increased with age, whereas experiencing fright reactions to fictional stories decreased with age. Younger children tended to fear more things that could not occur in the real world than did older children. Additionally, preschool children responded more intensely to natural disasters and less intensely to the contents about violence between strangers than did older children. More specifically, the maximum enhancement in fright reactions to news occurred between kindergarten and second grade (e.g., Cantor, 1994; Smith & Moyer-Gusar, 2006; Van Der Molen et al., 2005; and Valkenburg et al., 2000).

**Recommendations for Future Studies**

Studies of children’s fright reactions to televised depictions of horrifying events or violence have been studied for many decades. Most studies investigated the short-term effects of media-induced fear in children. Measuring children’s immediate emotional reactions to televised depictions could explain the immediate fright in children. Some children may experience short-term fright. In some cases, fright remains in children’s thoughts and may affect behavior some time afterward (Cantor, 1994). Thus, long-term fright effects on children should be further studied (Valkenburg et al., 2000).

Scholars should extend the studies of fright reactions to other groups of people (e.g., young adults, senior adults). Not only do children experience fright from televised depictions, but adults also experience fright such as terrorism, health diseases, and war. Contemporary televised programs, especially news coverage, play an important role in depicting the frightening scenes to viewers.
As fright is widespread, more studies focusing on fright among adults are needed in order to extend knowledge and to be able to handle those fears more effectively.

In addition, as mentioned previously, most studies on fright reactions to media presentations have been examined in the United States and European countries. A limited number of studies have been conducted in Asia, especially in Thailand. Most studies in Thailand investigated the relationships among media exposure, knowledge, attitude, and demographic information (Chanwisate, 2003; Ranweysong, 1991; Waiwattanakorn, 1999). Little is known on the influence of media-induced fear on children. We do not know how young children in Thailand will react or respond to media presentations of dreadful events, disasters, and violent contents and how young children in Thailand will be affected by these media-induced fear and violence. It is plausible that some results may not be applied or explained fright reactions of media contents among Thais’ children. For example, the issue of sensitization pertaining to news presentation of war among young children in the United States might not be applied to Thai contexts in which the war threat is less likely to be happening. Children in Thailand may be less likely to be afraid of the war threats than children in the United States. This area of research needs to be explored. This would help extend our knowledge of the effects of media on children in different countries to find a way to help children coping with their fear when exposing to some media contents.

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