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MEDIA INFLUENCE AND CHILDHOOD AGGRESSION: INSIGHTS FROM A QUALITATIVE STUDY IN THE HANTHANA TEA ESTATE COMMUNITY

S.G.P. Bhagya Kumari

School of Social Work, National Institute of Social Development, Sri Lanka
Email: Prasangibhagya88@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The research examines the impact of Tamil films on the aggressive behaviours of children aged 6-18 years residing in the Hanthana Tea Estate community in Kandy, Sri Lanka. This community and context have limited resources in terms of their socio-economic background, and minimal parental supervision in recreational environments for children in this community often takes place mediated through media as a source of both entertainment and social learning. A qualitative case study methodology was utilized to collect data through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations with a total of ten children with observable aggressive behaviours. Through a thematic analysis of the data, we encountered three prominent themes, (1) Behavioural Assimilation of the Heroes of Tamil Cinema, (2) Violent Behaviours as a Normalized Approach to Conflict Resolution, and (3) Media Consumption as a Coping Strategy for Emotion and Social Deprivation. The findings suggested that the repeated exposure to violent narratives in films support elements of imitation, and social learning by desensitizing and compensating for the emotional and social voids presented throughout their day to day lived context. The study emphasizes the connection between the exposure to the media, socio-cultural context and emotional development of children. The findings from the study suggest that while media consumption can be associated with aggressive behaviours, these behaviours are further exacerbated within the context of the structural vulnerabilities of plantation children. Following the findings and recommendations of the study, the suggestions are for integrated approaches including, media literacy, after-school activity expansions, parental mediation and school-based mental health support approaches, to limit the negative behavioural outcomes of children's media consumptions with violence.

1. Introduction

Children today are growing up in an increasingly media influenced world. Movies,television, and online media have turned out to be the main sources of entertainment and socialization, which often shape the perceptions, attitudes and behaviours of youths. In most cases, these media images can be educational and create innovative ideas; however they can also propagate violence, aggression, and antisocial behaviours models. The Tamil movies have a wide following among the youth of the tea estate communities in Sri Lanka, where recreational activities facilities are scarce and social restrictions severely lead people a significant amount of time with screen-based entertainment.

The Hanthana tea estate community in Kandy is a unique socio-economic setting where children are faced by various challenges such as poverty, lack of parental guidance because of labour requirements and limited availability of positive leisure activities.In this kind of environment, the effects of media exposure on child behaviour can be even more powerful. Investigation within this community indicated that the teachers and parents of the estate community were worried about the high rates of aggression among school going children. The informal discussions and observations provided also suggested that lots of children regularly watch the Tamil movies with violence, revenge, and heroism and often they tend to associate themselves with the role models of violence.

Violent behavior in children does not only interfere with their academic and social adaptation but also reflects the general issues about media literacy, parenting, and emotional control. The overall explanation of the impact of media content on the attitudes and interactions of children is thus crucial to educators, social workers, and policymakers who wish to promote positive child development in plantation industries. This paper attempts to clarify the connection between the exposure of the media especially Tamil films and the violent behaviours of school children in the Hanthana tea estate community using qualitative inquiry.

2. Literature Review

The behaviour of children and their socio-emotional development is determined by a complex of contextual factors among which the exposure to media is one of the most extensive parts of the experience children live in various environments. The review is based on three thematic areas that are interconnected: (1) the theoretical and empirical connections between media exposure and youth aggression, (2) the contextual and

cultural modulating factors such as parental mediation and socioeconomic environment on media outcomes, and (3) the empirical results of Sri Lanka and South Asia more generally on the association between media and behaviour in children and adolescents.

Violent Media Exposure and Childhood Aggression

Classical media-effects approaches, specifically Social Learning Theory (Bandura) and Cultivation Theory are basic constructs by which the effects of repeated viewing of aggressive or violent film material on the behavioural scripts of children can be examined. The empirical research shows that children exposed to more violent media develop an increased tendency to arousal, aggressive cognition and scripts, and behavioral imitation of aggression heroes (Gentile et al., 2014). Huesmann et al. (2003) conducted a comprehensive literature review of studies concerning the violent media and its influence on children and adolescents and found that the short-term effects of violent imagery on arousal, aggressive thoughts, and behaviours are consistent, with the study also showing that violent media have longer-term associations expressed into adolescence and early adulthood.

In an empirical experiment on television violence in India, the aggression levels of children were positively related to the hours spent watching television, children age, personality, and the availability or lack of parental discourse concerning the contents shown on television (Ahmad, 2011). In the same vein, a recent study published in an Indian journal examined the importance of media in increasing aggression on students; the authors discovered that exposure to televised violence, to video games, and to internet content were all connected with higher levels of aggressive behaviour self-reported by students (Kumari, 2022).

All these findings describe a strong correlation between violent media exposure and aggression. However, it is important to remember that these relationships are almost never deterministic; the effect of media exposure is in a wider constellation of risk and protective factors.

Contextual and Moderating Factors

Media effects are not evenly distributed, the reaction of children on the contents of the media is controlled by various contextual and personal determinants. Parental mediation, including; co-viewing, discussion and rule-setting, have been demonstrated to help reduce the adverse impact of violent media. As an example, a study conducted in Tamil Nadu revealed that parental oversight mediated the connection involving exposure to violent movies and violent youth (Shalini et al., 2025).

Media as interpreted and reacted to is also influenced by the socio-economic and cultural environment in which children are exposed. Children can be more prone to adopt aggressive scripts in media where there are few other forms of leisure or no parental supervision, or a higher level of socio-economic stress. A Sri Lankan study that analyses excessive screen use reported that children and adolescents exhibited a higher rate of attentional problems, language delays, and behavioural issues compared to high levels of exposure to digital media but this review was not limited to the topics of aggression (Rohanachandra, 2022). Therefore, exposure to violent media is a prerequisite to the potential media-induced aggression, but the socio-cultural surrounding and the mediation through the family have a great impact on the extent and orientation of any effect.

Evidence from Sri Lanka and South Asia

There are few studies that have conducted empirical research into the causal relationship between exposure to films and child aggression in Sri Lanka, however, relevant findings indicate that there are salient patterns. Pathirana (2016) investigated aggressive behaviours in preschoolers, including the role played by peer relationships, stressors in families, and disciplinary practices that are approved by cultures, but no mention was made concerning media exposure as a key variable. The article of Shoib et al. (2022) provides an in-depth literature review of psychosocial stressors in the Sri Lankan youth population, pointing out that media and the online presence is becoming a recognized risk factor in the context of a complex set of social problems.

A current study in South -India surveyed school-going children in the city of Chennai and evaluated their favorite types of films especially the action and superhero stories as well as the social implications of watching movies. This research established a relationship between watching the movies and the attitude dispositions and behavioural inclinations, but the inferential chain that assumed causality was underdeveloped (Pugalendhi et al., 2018).

Taken together, these regional studies suggest that the exposure of film and media helps to realize aggressive behavior in children and this is particularly true in socio economic disadvantaged situations. However, there remains an obvious gap in the literature with respect to qualitative, contextual research exploring how children process violent film materials cognitively, how such materials interrelate with native standards of aggression (e.g. peer-group communication, family disciplinary practices) and how these processes are being enacted in plantation-community contexts like tea estates in Sri Lanka.

The world of literature reports that there is a correlation between violent media exposure and aggression in children. Nevertheless, the empirical evidence, which has

been made in the plantation-based societies, where media consumption patterns might not be similar, where there are fewer formal recreational choices, and where socio-economic vulnerabilities are high, has not been sufficiently analyzed. Besides this, there are limited studies that are unique to Sri Lanka, which have examined Tamil cinematic exposure rather than television or media exposure, and its role in aggression among school-aged children (6 years and above) in a qualitative perspective. This gap in research gives a justification to the study under focus that focuses on schoolchildren living in the community of the Hanthana Tea Estate especially those who get referred to the educational institutions due to their development of aggressive behaviours with the view to producing a holistic qualitative description of the impact of Tamil films exposure in the context of this specific socio-cultural setting.

3. Methodology

The study is based on constructivist ontology, which presupposes the fact that the reality is created with the help of collective and subjective experience of people but does not exist as a single objective truth. Children, parents, and teacher perceive media and aggression in terms of their social, cultural and emotional perceptions. In line with that, an interpretivist epistemology will be used to direct the study, with a focus on perceptions, interpretations, and meanings of the participants. As the phenomenon of media impact on aggression in children is highly subjective, socially constructed, and contextual, the qualitative methodology was the one that was chosen. This research design allows the researcher to dive deep into the lived experiences of the children in the community and intricate socio-cultural dynamics of the Hanthana Tea Estate community in a more profound way, which other quantitative research designs are unable to achieve.

3.1 Study Area and Rationale for Selection

This study investigates how children contextualise Tamil cinematics text, what determinants aid in their emulation of certain behavioural patterns and also the multifactorial environmental determinants such as family, community and school determinants which determine certain behaviour repertoire. Answering these questions requires the investigation of the subjective exegeses of people, their mental activity, the emotional experiences, and the dynamics of interactions, which cannot be quantified. As a result, the constructs of aggression and media effects are hypothesized to be context-dependent requiring a flexible and interpretive approach of analysis. The use of qualitative methodological framework will enable carrying out a multi-perspectival investigation by looking at the phenomenon under study in the perspective of children, parents, and educators and, thus, providing a holistic view of the phenomenon in question. The adopted paradigm of methodology also allows factoring in the complexities of plantation life where the socioeconomic

vulnerabilities, lack of recreational opportunities, and little parental control all individually mediate the media exposure and reception.

The given study was conducted in the territories of the Hanthana Tea Estate community in Kandy, which is a plantation sector with strong socio-economic vulnerabilities.The selection of this community was based on the fact that their children are deprived of organised recreational programs, become more vulnerable to media exposure, particularly Tamil movies and lack of coherent parental control due to labour pressures. An initial discussion with teachers and local residents indicated that there were, increasing worries on childhood aggression. The socio-cultural and environmental factors in the tea estate, such as poverty, inadequate leisure facilities, low media literacy, and emotional starvation make it a perfect place to study how violent movie content reacts with these weakness to affect the behaviour of children.

3.2 Research Design

To examine the effects of the Tamil films on aggression in children in the natural setting, a qualitative case study design was applied. The case study method allowed the researcher to study real-life behaviour in depth whereby the interaction of personal, family, and socio-cultural factors should be considered. This structure allowed a holistic approach to analysis whereby various sources of data were used (interviews, observation and focus group discussion) hence where triangulation was possible and the validity of the data was also supported.

3.3 Sampling Procedure and Sample Size

The sampling was purposive and the sample was made up of participants who were directly relevant to the study subject. The sample comprised:

- There were 10 children (aged 6 to 18) who had conspicuous aggressive behaviours as reported by their teachers.
- 8 parents, who were representatives of the parents of children in the sample.
- 6 teachers with first-hand experience on behavioural problems of children and classroom dynamics.

There were two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):

1. FGD 1: With 5 teachers.
2. FGD 2: With 6 parents.

Children whose psychiatric or developmental disorder had been identified were not used so that the aggression seen was within context, but not medical in nature. It was

also considered suitable to use purposive sampling as it was necessary to make sure that the participants had substantial experiences that are both related to aggression and media exposure.

3.4 Data Collection Methods and Research Tools

The qualitative research used four major research tools:

- **Children Interviews (Semi-structured).**

Such interviews helped the researcher to analytically and methodically study the experiences of children to Tamil movies in terms of their favored characters, feelings after watching the movies, and behavioural reactions. The interview design allowed spontaneous expression of the perceptions by the children and it also ensured that the key areas like preferences of movies, frequency of viewing films and self-reflection of aggressive behaviours of the children were covered.

- Parents Semi-structured interviews.

Parents gave information on the media practices at home, parental monitoring and emotional and behavioural patterns of their children and daily interactions. These interviews were useful in determining family dynamics, lapse in supervision, and the emotional or social situations that lead to an escalation in screen usage.

- Semi Structured Teacher interviews.

Teachers provided professional feedbacks on the aggression of children in schools, which included conflict, imitation of movie characters and changes in behaviours over time. Their opinions were used to correct the self-reporting of children and were used to give context clarity.

- **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs).**

FGDs promoted society thinking and brought out common societal views. One of the teacher FGDs explored the nature of behavioural patterns in classrooms, which occur regularly, what usually triggers aggressive behaviour, peer influence and how school structure can be used to handle behavioural problems. A parent FGD enabled parenting issues and emotional needs of children, house hold media habits and parental consciousness about the impact of media. The group context encouraged the participants to elaborate and develop on the ideas of other members of the group

unveiling community norms, shared concerns and as well as collective views of media and aggression.

Naturalistic and Classroom Observations.

Real-time behavioural manifestations observed in school included aggression, film scene imitation, peer interactions, and emotional regulation strategies of children. The observations were used to supplement the interviews by providing non-verbal and behavioural evidence. The combination of the tools enabled triangulation and enhanced the comprehension of the influence of media exposure on aggression.

3.5 Data Analysis

The analysis of patterns in the data was done using thematic analysis. The interviews and focus group discussions were audio-taped, transcribed verbatim and multiple iterative reviews were conducted on the transcripts to obtain accuracy.

The process of coding was performed in two different stages:

- Deductive coding with the initial research goals (e.g., aggression, imitation, emotional escape).
- Inductive coding, which enables unexpected insights to be made (e.g., lack of parental bonding, normalization of violence).

The resulting of codes were carefully geared to larger themes using the 6 step framework by Braun and Clarke. Similarly, comparative analyses of the perspectives of children, parents and teachers revealed such themes as behavioural assimilation, normalization of violence and the media as an emotional escape. This repetitive method helped me as the researcher to not only relate the what, but also the latent meaning of the narratives of the participants.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

High priority was given to ethical considerations throughout the study. Given that the research involved minors, formal permission from the Zonal Education Office to conduct the research via the Hanthana Tea Estate Community School principal was required for institutional approval and adherence to the educational regulations. In addition, a written consent form providing parents/guardians with details of the

purpose and procedures of the study and confidentiality measures and their rights as participants was administered to parents/guardians, and a form of consent was obtained from the children using age-appropriate language to ensure their participation in the research was wholly voluntary. Confidentiality was assured through the anonymization of all data, removal of any identifying data and safe storage of records. All interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted in safe, comfortable and familiar environments within the school setting to promote the psychological well-being of the participants. All participants children, parents and teachers were informed that their participation was purely voluntary, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty. In addition, any sensitive topics regarding issues such as aggression and emotional experiences were handled with great care to ensure discussions would not cause participants any distress or discomfort.

4. Results

The observational analysis of interviews and observational data recorded among a group of 10 secondary school students between the ages of six and eighteen who were living in a tea plantation known as Hanthana revealed a complex relationship between exposure to Tamil cinema and expression of aggressive behaviour. There were three major themes (1) Behavioral Assimilation of Cinematic Characters, (2) Normalization of Violence as a Conflict -Resolution Mechanism and (3) Media as an Avenue of Emotional and Social Alleviation.

4.1 Assimilation of Film Characters through Behavior

One of the common trends in the participants was the imitation of behaviours, gestures and languages used in the aggressive Tamil film heroes. Many of the respondents showed respect to the described heroic characters who used violence as the form of domination expression. This imitation was more so among male participants.

> *"I like Vijay's movies. It seems that he appears strong when he fights. I can also perform like that in school sometimes when someone bothers me." (Case study 4, Male, Age 12)*

> *"I also feel that I can also do the same after watching a fight scene. It makes me feel powerful." (Case study 7, Female, Age 10)*

It was further imitated through gestures and slangs and even assuming rebellious behaviors toward authorities including those of teachers and this made matters more difficult in the hands of teachers dealing with behavioral issues.

4.2 Normalization of Violence as a Conflict Resolution Strategy

One of the notable results is that repeated exposure to violent Tamil cinema seems to help in the desensitization of violence as an acceptable form of dealing with interpersonal dispute. Many respondents confirmed that it was acceptable to protect themselves by being physically aggressive whenever provoked to do so in line with the narrative traditions in movies.

> *"The hero will strike his/her opponent in the films when he/she insults him/her. That's how he gets respect. I also believe that is okay at times." (Case study 3, a male, age 15)*

> *"My brother was teasing me and I slapped him. In one of the movies I watched, hero did the same thing to his brother- no one reprimanded him either." (Case study 1, female, age 8)*

This perceived legitimacy is a sign of problematic internalization of media messages, where violence is glorified as a demonstration of power at the relative loss of value on non-violent negotiation.

4.3 Media as an Escape from Emotional and Social Strain

To many participants, Tamil movies served as an emotional form of escape of domestic pressures, educational pressures, or lack of parental control that could be attributed to the work assignments at the tea plantation. The movie experience provided children with inspirational narratives which often disconnected them with the emotional realities of daily situations of their real lives.

> *"In the absence of Amma, I am bored and sad. Watching films allow me to forget." (Case study 2, Male, Age 9)*

> *"There is no playground or fun stuff here. So post school, I watch films. It is more comfortable than being alone." (Case study 8, Female, Age 13)*

However, it seemed that this reliance on cinematic escapism strengthened the maladaptive coping mechanisms, whereby the media served as recreation, as well as a substitute in emotional support and social interaction.

The qualitative findings imply that children's aggression in the context of the Hanthana tea estate community roams from their exposure to Tamil movies, which they process based on their own sociocultural and emotional backgrounds. Although not all the children showed direct modeling of behaviours, many cases of aggression appeared to unfold from their internalization of the movies and having limited

emotional regulation capabilities as alternatives to the absence of more positive recreational activities. Our findings highlight a need for media-literacy initiatives, school-based emotional support initiatives, and enriched after-school activities.

5. Discussion

The results of this paper show that there is a strong relationship between the exposure to Tamil cinema and violent behavior among school-going children living in the Hanthana tea estate community. Three main trends appeared, namely, the emulation of violent movie protagonists, the legitimization of violence as a valid reaction to conflict, and the use of media as an emotional defense. These results are also in line with the existing media effects theories- especially the Social Learning Theory by Bandura of which children develop and imitate the actions of those in positions of influence such as the characters in the movies (Bandura, 1977).

Modeling and Imitation of Film Aggression

The fact that children tend to imitate the heroes of the popular Tamil films indicates that children view the characters in films as role models in a vacuum where they do not have other figures to associate with them. This observation is shared with the findings of the study conducted by Huesmann et al. (2003) who found that children that had been repeatedly exposed to heroic violence tended to view aggression as a socially acceptable behavior and to see it as one that leads to social dominance. At Hanthana, this tendency is magnified by the lack of various stimuli to recreation that leads to excessive use of films as the main source of identity and influence. The importance of such media images may be further enhanced by the plantation setting, which is restrained by the socio-economic factors.

Normalization of Violence in Social Interactions

The acceptance of physical aggression as a legitimate way of resolving conflict demonstrates wider historical and cultural themes in Tamil cinematic story-telling of violence being morally justified or necessary. This not only suggests the media has an influence but, also, the children were limited in their development of emotional regulation skills and possibly lacked positive models of conflict resolution in their environment. Ali et al. (2020) and Pathirana (2016) similarly reported that children from economically disadvantaged communities' displayed a higher level of aggression that was positively correlated with exposure to violent media and inconsistent parental modeling of aggression in their behavior toward children.

Media as a Substitute for Emotional and Social Needs

The experience of using films as an emotional escape, as documented in other plantation or marginalized communities, is consistent with children who do not have psychosocial support, structure, or even leisure activities. The emotional void due to the absence of parents or the systematic neglect of institutional caretakers makes children vulnerable to maladaptive coping strategies. Immersion in films can create comfort, but also trap children in this coping strategy. In other contexts in Sri Lanka, children frequently use screens to passively cope with loneliness, stress, and lack of play infrastructure (Rohanachandra, 2022). This is significant in a context in which the broader structural issues that form children's experiences do not have to mean media; it lends to understanding the role of larger structural issues rather than a consideration of media as the only origin of behavior changes.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

This research highlights the mutually influential relationship between media, social norms in relation to media, and environmental factors in influencing child behavior. With this understanding of the broader social environment of child behavior, it is clear that a response and intervention to media-generated aggression must include more than altering just media habits:

- Media literacy in schools focused on children and parents incorporating critical awareness of what they watch in films.
- Structured after-school programs devoted to sports and arts and peer cooperation to lessen passive dependence on media.
- Parent involvement workshops for the tea plantation community focused on mediating everyday conversations about media.

The study also indicates that aggressive behavior by children does not simply occur by imitation but a part of an adaptation strategy to environments where conflict is of social, if not normal even normative, practice.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This qualitative study assessed the impact of children's exposure to Tamil films on aggressive behaviors in children aged 6-18 years in the Hanthana tea estate community. Through a case study approach of 10 children referred by teachers, the study revealed that aggressive behaviors were not sole responses, but were deeply embedded in children's media habits, emotional contexts, and socio-cultural contexts.

Overall, the findings: imitative behavior of film characters (imitation), normalization of violence as a method of conflict resolution, and media as an emotional escape,

illustrate the multiple ways media can shape attitudes and actions among children. These behaviors became further reinforced from being unable to find alternative recreational opportunities, low parental supervision, and culturally rooted tropes of power and revenge in Tamil cinema. The plantation context, compounded by overlapping economic and social vulnerabilities, helps provide a context where media effects can take stronger psychological and behavioral hold in children.

In combination with this, intervention must have both preventive and transformative elements and should not only be targeted at children, but also in children's environments. Recommendations include:

- **Media Literacy Programs**

Implement media literacy programming for children in school, which includes instruction for students about developing critical reflection on film content and differentiating between entertainment and real-world behavior. This instruction may include analysis of emotional regulation and interactions with peers with instruction designed to discuss and help the child understand when to ignore negative behaviors depicted in film.

- **Parental Guidance and Community Awareness**

Educate parents, educators, and interested caregivers on the potential effects of violent media exposure on child behavior through school-sponsored community education sessions. Encourage parents to co-watch films with their children, limit screen-time, and discuss the film with their children to reduce exposure to factors that may be detrimental to their child's ongoing development.

- **Enrichment of After-School Environments**

Facilitate opportunities for productive and supervised after-school activity as a means of limiting children's dependency on screen-based entertainment, like sports clubs, art programs, gardening, and culture-based engagement. These structured outside-of-school experiences would facilitate healthier development of emotional expression as well as support acquisition of new skills.

- **Strengthening School-Based Psychosocial Support**

Create initiatives that are led by the schools, such as peer counseling groups, safe play areas for children's use, and teacher training initiatives, to recognize and support children exhibiting aggressive behavior. The combination of social work and counseling interventions can provide support for underlying emotional distress that may be impacting the aggressive behavior.

- **Partnership with Film and Media Stakeholders**

Partnership with media producers and film distributors in the local region can address the importance of rating films and other media in child sensitive ways, while taking into account the blended social influence of violent portrayals for films that would likely be viewed by children in rural and estate communities.

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