

The Influence of Media Violence Exposure on Cyberbullying Among Adolescents: The Mediating Role of Parental Monitoring

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Abstract:

Alongside the development of media, youth are exposed to varied content, including violence, which affects their thinking habits. Violent media exposure has led to an increase in cyberbullying among youth. Cyberbullying among adolescents has emerged as a social issue of global concern. This study investigates the influence of media violence exposure on adolescent cyberbullying, emphasizing the mediating role of parental monitoring. This study explores how exposure to violent media content predicts cyberbullying behaviors and how parental monitoring moderates this relationship using data from adolescent respondents. The findings reveal that exposure to violent media content significantly increases the likelihood of cyberbullying and restrictive parental monitoring is positively predicted higher levels of cyberbullying. At lower levels of parental monitoring, the positive effect of media violence exposure on cyberbullying weakens, while higher levels of parental monitoring exacerbate this effect. This study concludes that parenting styles and family environment are crucial in either mitigating or exacerbating the risk of cyberbullying. The results of the analysis highlight the need for parents to adopt more balanced monitoring strategies to reduce the risk of cyberbullying among adolescents.

Keywords: Media violence exposure; cyberbullying; parental monitoring; adolescents.

1. Introduction

The upgrading and iteration of Internet technology and mobile communication devices have brought great convenience to the study, life, and work of the public. According to a survey by the China Internet

Information Centre, the number of Internet users in China reached 1.09 billion in 2023, with youth Internet users accounting for 18.7 percent [1]. The findings of the Survey Report on Internet Use by Minors show that the Internet penetration rate among minors and adolescents in China is 97.2% and 99%,

respectively, indicating that the vast majority of China's adolescents have become Internet users and have extensive contact with the Internet [2]. The content of the films, television dramas, and online games that young people come into contact with is varied and mixed and even contains a great deal of violent content. This violent content has a profound impact on the way of thinking habits of young people in its unique mechanisms, and there is no lack of harmful aspects. Under the influence of violent media exposure, cyberbullying has also become a severe social problem. Cyberbullying spreads rapidly and widely, and the phenomenon of cyberbullying among youth is on the rise [3].

Accompanied by advanced media development, cyberbullying among adolescents has become a social norm issue that has drawn scholars' attention globally. Recent research indicates that the prevalence of cyberbullying varies widely, with victimization rates reported between 13.99% and 57.50% across different studies [4]. The most common form of cyberbullying identified is verbal violence, which can manifest through various digital platforms such as social media, messaging apps, or other online forms of media that facilitate communication between users [4]. Existing literature has identified numerous risk factors associated with cyberbullying, like depression and excessive social comparison. However, several researchers demonstrated that parental involvement can play a crucial role in mitigating the risks of cyberbullying. Effective parental intervention strategies have been introduced in the past, such as fostering open communication and enhancing parental knowledge of internet use, have been found to significantly reduce the likelihood of adolescents becoming involved in cyberbullying, either as perpetrators or victims [5]. Although extensive research has been conducted in the field of violent media, the specific influence of individual characteristics related to violent media exposure on the occurrence of cyberbullying among youth remains mostly underexplored. Therefore, it is necessary to analyze the internal mechanism of cyberbullying and its relationship with violent media through research so as to find solutions to prevent or curb the phenomenon of cyberbullying.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Exposure to Media Violence

Newspapers, online games, film and television works, and other media commonly found in society often contain a certain amount of violent content, which can cause extreme negative psychological effects on people's normal lives. Therefore, this type of violent content can be con-

sidered as media violence [6]. According to the channels of processing and perception, the media in which the content is carried, the violent content is classified as song violence, video game violence and film violence. [7]. Media violence exposure is derived from violence exposure, and violence exposure is divided into two types: real and virtual violence exposure [8]. Urban riots, gang fights, and other incidents that individuals personally experience in real life are real exposures to violence, while what individuals are exposed to through movies, television, and games through mobile phones, the Internet, and other tools are virtual exposures to violence [9]. Exposure to media violence is one of many forms of virtual exposure to violence. A large number of studies have shown that after players or viewers are exposed to violent content in the media, their aggression significantly increases, and their aggressive behaviors increase significantly. At the same time, this effect does not differ significantly among individuals of different genders and age groups [10]. The American Public Health Conference has announced the results of a study that long-term exposure to media violence will cause individuals to become desensitized to violent scenes. They will regard the world around them as a place of violence, agree with the rationality of violence, and increase their violent behavior [11]. A more recent study has supported this point by demonstrating a positive association between exposure to media violence and cyberbullying through aggression-related processes, although the effect is generally small [12]. The link between media violence exposure and cyberbullying perpetration is significantly stronger among adolescents who hold weaker anti-bullying attitudes [12].

2.2 Cyberbullying

Traditional bullying in the real world has spread to cyberspace, giving rise to the concept of "cyberbullying." Some early scholars proposed that cyberbullying is repeated and malicious harm to groups and individuals through information and communication technology and also emphasized that the targets of cyberbullying are mostly individuals or groups that cannot protect themselves [13].

Regarding the nature of cyberbullying, some scholars believe that there is no essential difference between cyberbullying and traditional bullying except for the historical background and implementation methods [14]. However, most scholars tend to believe that the two have some common characteristics, but there are certain differences in their manifestations [15]. Compared with traditional bullying, with the assistance of network technology, cyberbullies are more hidden, which brings great difficulties to the monitoring of cyberbullying [16]. At the same time,

compared with traditional bullying, cyberbullying has a faster spread speed and a wider spread range, and the repetition cost of cyberbullying is lower, so it can cause serious harm to the bullied in a short-term event [4]. In general, adolescent cyberbullying has the characteristics of concealment, repetition, and extensiveness, so the consequences it causes are relatively long-lasting.

Cyberbullying can have serious negative effects on the mental health of those who are bullied. After experiencing cyberbullying, the likelihood of developing physical and psychological disorders increases. A survey study showed that sleep disorders are common among higher vocational students and students who have suffered from cyberbullying exhibit particularly severe symptoms that require focused intervention [17]. Moreover, whether it involves cyberbullying, verbal bullying, or physical bullying, the odds of depression among adolescents who participate in bullying activities are significantly higher [18]. These negative effects can also occur in younger age groups. In a study of middle school students in Anhui Province, China, researchers found that cyberbullying has become an epidemic and is highly correlated with suicide and other psychological disorders among students [19]. Regression analysis results further indicate that adolescents' suicidal behavior is strongly associated with cyberbullying, and those who suffer from cyberbullying are more likely to have suicidal thoughts and plans [20]. Therefore, the research gap on cyberbullying and its interventions needs to be addressed by future studies.

2.3 Moderating Role of Parental Monitoring

Parental monitoring has been proposed since the 1950s, with an early definition of "monitoring or paying attention to children's whereabouts, activities, and adaptation" [21]. This definition clearly focuses on supervision of children's behavior, but some scholars argue that parental control should be divided into two types. One is parents' knowledge of their children's activities, and the other is the way parents discipline their children, which can also be understood as the rules imposed by parents on their children's behavior [22]. In children's socialization, parents must monitor and guide their children. In the monitoring process, parents can discover possible problems by understanding their children's lives and taking necessary actions in advance, thereby providing psychological support for their children [23]. In family education, previous research also indicates that appropriate parental monitoring can effectively predict and reduce children's rebellious tendencies and aggressive behavior. If parents employ more rational monitoring strategies, their children will likely exhibit fewer problem behaviors [24]. However, there

are some differences in the effects of parental monitoring between China and Western countries. Chinese parents' monitoring of their children is usually authoritarian [24]. Authoritarian parental monitoring may lead to better academic performance for students within the Chinese education system, but the opposite effect is observed in Western countries [26].

Although previous research has extensively explored the effects of violent media content on aggressive behavior, there remains a large gap in understanding how these variables influence the occurrence of adolescent cyberbullying. Existing research has confirmed that parental supervision can mitigate adolescent rebellious behavior, but the relationship between media violence and cyberbullying remains unclear. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating the direct effects of media violence on cyberbullying behavior and examining how different levels of parental supervision moderate this relationship.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

This study randomly distributed 400 questionnaires through the Questionnaire Star platform, and a total of 353 questionnaires were collected, with a questionnaire recovery rate of 88.25%. According to United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), the population aged 10-19, 15-24, and 10-24 are defined as adolescents, youth, and young people, respectively (UNICEF, n.d.). However, the age range was extended to include individuals aged 10-25 years to capture a broader spectrum of youth experiences in this study. After screening the collected questionnaires, 184 were deemed valid, corresponding to a valid response rate of 46%. The sample was predominantly male, with 170 male respondents (92.39%) and 14 female respondents (7.61%). The average age of male respondents was 19.15 years ($SD = 2.10$), while the average age of female respondents was 21.41 years ($SD = 3.79$).

3.2 Measurements

3.2.1 Violent Media Exposure Survey

The violent media exposure in this study was measured using the Violent Media Exposure Survey compiled by Gentile et al. [26]. The scale consists of six items, three of which use a 5-point scale to assess respondents' exposure to three types of media: television, movies, and video games. A rating of 1 represents "once a month or less," while a rating of 5 represents "five times a week or more." This scale measures respondents' frequency of exposure

to the three media types. The remaining three items use a 7-point scale to assess the degree of violence in the media content respondents are exposed to. A rating of 1 represents “no violence,” and a rating of 7 represents “very violent.” The degree of exposure to each type of media is multiplied by the degree of violence in the media, yielding a violence score for that medium. The sum of the violence scores for the three media types was used for analysis, with higher scores indicating greater exposure to violent media. According to Gentile et al., the internal consistency of the scale is 0.68, and the internal consistency in this study is 0.74 [27].

3.2.2 Cyberbullying Scale

In cyberbullying surveys, the Cyberbullying Scale developed by Topcu and Erdur-Baker in 2010 and localized for China by Chu and Fan is commonly used [28, 29]. The scale is divided into: the Cyberbullying Scale and the Cyber Victimization Scale, each containing 14 items. This study uses only the Cyberbullying Scale. Additionally, drawing from the Chinese version of the Child Bullying Questionnaire, originally developed by Olweus and localized by Zhang et al., this study expanded the Cyberbullying Scale to 18 items [30]. The original four-point scale was retained, with “1” representing “never” and “4” representing “more than five times,” to measure the degree of cyberbullying reported by the respondents.

3.2.3 Parental Monitoring Scale

There are two commonly used parental monitoring scales. The first was developed by Stattin and Kerr, which evaluates the intensity of parental monitoring by measuring the parents’ understanding of their children’s behavior [31]. The assumption is that the greater the monitoring intensity, the deeper the parents’ understanding of their children [31]. However, due to certain limitations, other scholars have revised this scale, dividing it into three dimensions, such as parental awareness, to make it more comprehensive [32]. Chinese scholar Zhang took into account the differences in parental monitoring and divided it into two scales, one for father monitoring and one for mother monitoring [33]. The other scale was also developed by Hakan Stattin but later revised by scholars to include three dimensions: parental awareness, autonomous monitoring, and restrictive monitoring. Each dimension contains 4 items, for a total of 12 items [34]. The scale uses a five-point scoring method, where “1” represents “completely inconsistent” and “5” represents “completely consistent,” to assess the level of parental monitoring. The higher the score for restrictive monitoring, the higher the level of parental monitoring. In this study, the restrictive monitoring dimension is used as the primary measure of parental

monitoring.

3.3 Process

In this study, general demographic information, the media violence exposure scale, the cyberbullying scale, and the parental monitoring scale were compiled into a set of surveys and randomly distributed through the Questionnaire Star platform. Given the sensitivity of the research topics, to ensure respondents were not concerned while completing the surveys, which could affect the authenticity and accuracy of the results, participants were informed of the confidentiality principles and measures of the study through written communication before beginning the survey. Their personal privacy was fully protected.

3.4 Data Analysis

The survey data were collected and initially screened using Excel spreadsheets. Surveys that did not meet the age criteria or were not filled out in a standardized manner were excluded. The remaining data were then entered into SPSS 26.0 software and analyzed using the PROCESS plug-in.

4. Results

4.1 Preliminary Analysis

In the Harman’s single-factor test conducted for this study, the eigenvalue of the data was greater than 1, indicating the presence of at least one factor. A total of six factors were identified, suggesting multiple potential explanatory dimensions in the data. Notably, the explanation rate of the first factor was 18.35%, which is below the commonly accepted threshold of 40%, indicating a low level of common method bias. Based on these results, we can conclude that the data collected in this study is minimally affected by CMB, ensuring the reliability of the research findings [35].

4.2 Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis are applied to the main variables in this study (see Table 1). Based on the measurement scales used, the media violence exposure scale has a score range of 0 to 105. The mean values of the three variables in this study are 15.82 ± 12.24 for media violence exposure, 1.05 ± 0.26 for cyberbullying, and 2.31 ± 1.25 for parental monitoring, all lower than the respective midpoints of the scales.

The results of the correlation analysis indicate a significant positive correlation between the three variables. The

correlation coefficient between media violence exposure and cyberbullying is 0.18, and the correlation coefficient between media violence exposure and parental monitoring is 0.31. Additionally, the correlation coefficient between

parental monitoring and cyberbullying is 0.26, with all p-values less than 0.01. Both media violence exposure and parental monitoring were found to be positive predictors of adolescent cyberbullying.

Table 1. Results of descriptive statistics and correlation analysis of main variables

Variables	M ± SD	1	2	3
1 Media Violence Exposure	15.82 ± 12.24	-		
2 Cyberbullying	1.05 ± 0.26	0.18*	-	
3 Parental Monitoring	2.31 ± 1.25	0.31*	0.26*	-

Notes: * $p < 0.01$.

4.3 The Moderating Role of Parental Monitoring

To further explore the internal mechanism behind the significant positive impact of the independent variable, media violence exposure, on the dependent variable, cyberbullying, this study included parental monitoring as a

moderator. The simple moderation effect model from the SPSS PROCESS macro was used to analyze the moderating role of parental monitoring in the relationship between media violence exposure and adolescent cyberbullying.

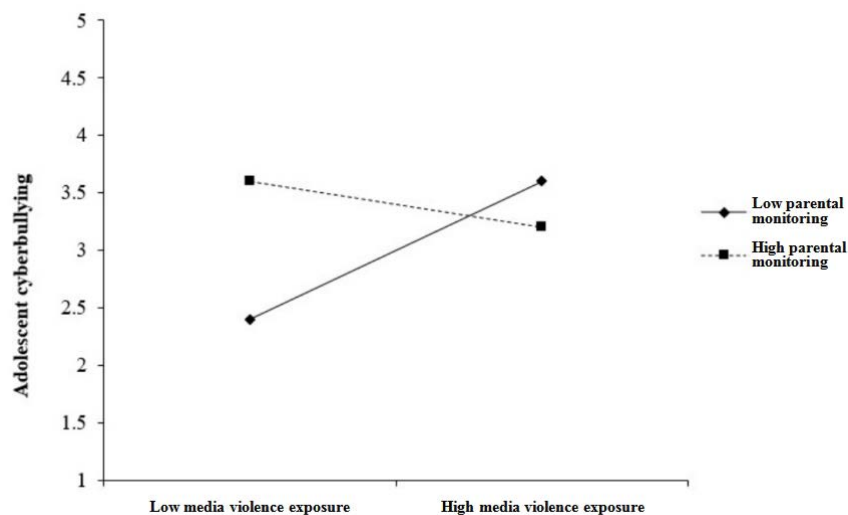


Fig 1. Simple slope test of the interaction of violent media exposure and parenting monitoring

A simple slope plot was used to examine the effect of media violence exposure on cyberbullying at different levels of parental monitoring. The results are displayed in Figure 1. There are notable differences in the prediction of cyberbullying by media violence exposure at two levels of parental monitoring: low ($M - 1$ SD) and high ($M + 1$ SD). At low levels of parental monitoring, the slope shows a downward trend, indicating that as parental monitoring increases, the positive effect of media violence exposure on cyberbullying weakens ($\beta = 0.60$, $t = 13.42$, $p = 0.000$). However, at high levels of parental monitoring, the slope shows an upward trend, indicating that as parental monitoring increases, the positive effect of media violence exposure on cyberbullying strengthens ($\beta = -0.20$, $t = -1.83$, $p = 0.070$).

5. Discussion

5.1 The Relationship between Exposure to Media Violence and Cyberbullying

According to the Aggression Model, individuals go through two stages before displaying aggressive behavior. The first is the reception of external environmental information, followed by the individual's internal cognitive processing and evaluation [36]. Social learning theory further explains this process, proposing that individual behavior is formed through observation and imitation of the behavior of those around them, which is then internalized into their own behavior patterns [37]. Studies have shown that individuals in violent environments are more likely to learn and adopt violence as a means of solving problems,

forming a cognitive model that considers aggressive behavior to be reasonable and acceptable [38].

Research by Duan et al. shows that frequent exposure to violent media content strengthens individuals' beliefs that aggressive behavior is reasonable, thereby enhancing the so-called "aggression normative beliefs." Based on this previous finding, the study further found that violent media not only affects individuals' views on aggressive behavior in the real world but may also reinforce aggressive normative beliefs in online environments [39]. Long-term exposure to media containing violent content may carry this cognitive pattern into the digital space, making individuals more likely to engage in radical behaviors such as cyberbullying.

5.2 Moderating Role of Parental Monitoring in the Relationship Between Violent Media Exposure and Cyberbullying

The results of this study demonstrate that parental monitoring plays a significant moderating role in the relationship between violent media exposure and adolescent cyberbullying. The findings from the simple slope test show that at lower levels of parental monitoring, the positive effect of media violence exposure on cyberbullying weakens. This suggests that adolescents with minimal parental supervision are more susceptible to the influence of violent media content, potentially due to the lack of oversight and guidance on appropriate online behavior. In such cases, parental monitoring serves as a buffer that reduces the likelihood of aggressive behaviors manifesting in online settings.

On the other hand, the results indicate that at higher levels of restrictive parental monitoring, the relationship between media violence exposure and cyberbullying is strengthened. This counterintuitive finding suggests that excessive or controlling parental monitoring might backfire, thus such approaches can further exacerbate the negative impact of direct media violence exposure. One possible explanation is that overly restrictive monitoring may lead to feelings of rebellion among adolescents, pushing them towards engaging in more aggressive behaviors. This is consistent with research showing that authoritarian parenting styles can sometimes have unintended negative consequences, including the reinforcement of maladaptive behaviors [25].

These findings highlight the importance of adopting a balanced approach to parental monitoring. While it is clear that parental involvement is crucial in moderating the influence of violent media on adolescent behavior, the type and degree of monitoring are equally important. Supportive and democratic forms of monitoring—such

as fostering open communication and encouraging autonomy—may be more effective in mitigating the negative effects of violent media, as they help adolescents develop self-regulation and critical thinking skills. This study provided a practical framework for adolescents to reduce the likelihood of engaging in cyberbullying.

This study empirically explores the role of parental monitoring in family upbringing from the perspective of media violence exposure, and it has at least the following theoretical significance. Excessive parental exposure to media and media violence sets poor role models within the family, reinforcing children's exposure to violent content and increasing the likelihood of cyberbullying. Moreover, excessive parental monitoring plays a key role in the development of social maladjustment (such as mobile phone addiction). However, relying solely on restrictive negative monitoring can be counterproductive, as children may respond with superficial obedience or outright rebellion.

Therefore, it is crucial for parents to understand that the essence of effective parental monitoring lies in positive approaches, such as showing understanding and care. As adolescents seek greater autonomy during their developmental stage, negative control—characterized by a lack of understanding and strict limitations on their behavior—fails to prevent maladaptive behaviors. We recommend that parents adopt democratic forms of monitoring, such as questioning and granting autonomy, rather than exercising strict control.

5. Limitations and Implications

Despite the significant findings, this study has several limitations that should be addressed in future research. The cross-sectional design of the study limits our ability to establish causality. While correlations between media violence exposure, parental monitoring, and cyberbullying were identified, we cannot confirm the direction of these relationships over time. Future studies could employ longitudinal designs to track changes in these variables over time. Additionally, while the study found that restrictive parental monitoring exacerbates the relationship between media violence exposure and cyberbullying, the nuanced roles of different types of parental monitoring were not fully explored. Scholars could also investigate other dimensions of parental monitoring, such as emotional warmth or social support, to provide more detailed coping strategies of how different approaches influence cyberbullying in adolescents.

The findings of this study have important implications for both parents and policymakers. For parents, the results suggest that adopting a balanced, supportive approach to monitoring adolescents—one that fosters open communi-

cation and grants autonomy—can help mitigate the negative effects of media violence exposure on cyberbullying. For policymakers and educators, the study highlights the need for interventions that promote positive parenting practices and media literacy programs to equip both adolescents and their families with the tools to navigate digital environments safely.

6. Conclusion

The findings suggest that exposure to violent media content significantly increases the likelihood of cyberbullying, and that rigorous parental monitoring positively predicts higher levels of cyberbullying. The positive effect of media violence exposure on cyberbullying was attenuated at lower levels of parental monitoring, while it was exacerbated by higher levels of parental monitoring. The study concluded that parenting styles and home environments are critical to mitigating or exacerbating the risk of cyberbullying. The results highlight the need for parents to adopt a more balanced monitoring strategy to reduce the risk of cyberbullying among adolescents.

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