

The Influence of Online Film and Television Media on Adolescents' Imitation of Digital Gender-Based Violence

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ABSTRACT

With the rapid development of digital media, online audiovisual content has become a significant part of adolescents' daily lives, and research on digital gender-based violence has become a recent focus. Concurrently, digital gender-based violence, as a new form of violence, is proliferating widely in various short dramas, online movies, and social media videos. For instance, the short drama market is projected to exceed 65 billion CNY by 2025, and the prevalent elements glamorizing gender-based violence in these works are profoundly influencing adolescents' gender perceptions and behavioral patterns. This study focuses on investigating the causal relationship and the extent of influence between adolescents' exposure to digital gender-based violence content in online film and television media and their intention to imitate such behaviors. Through multidimensional empirical analysis, it aims to fill the research gap regarding the impact of "digital gender-based violence" (e. g., online harassment, doxing, malicious photo editing) conveyed through film and television media, providing a scientific basis and intervention strategies for fostering a healthier online environment. This research employs content analysis and questionnaire surveys, concluding that adolescents' exposure to audiovisual content containing digital gender-based violence significantly enhances their intention to imitate such behaviors, with moral disengagement and reduced empathy serving as key mediating mechanisms. Effective parental intervention can mitigate the negative impact, while peer norms supporting aggressive behavior exacerbate it.

KEYWORDS

Adolescents; Digital gender-based violence; Online film and television media

1 Introduction

1.1 The Epoch's Beginning: The Intertwining of Digital Existence and Adolescent Socialization

We reside in a deeply mediatized society. According to the 53rd Statistical Report on China's Internet Development released by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), as of December 2023, the number of internet users in China reached 1.092 billion, with an internet penetration rate of 77.5%. Among them, adolescent netizens aged 10-19 account for over 10%, constituting a vast "digital native" population. Their cognitive construction, emotional development, identity formation, and social interactions are comprehensively embedded in cyberspace. The internet is no longer an external tool but an indispensable "living environment" in their growth process (Livingstone, S., & Helsper, E. J., 2007). While this deep digital existence brings boundless opportunities for adolescents, it also exposes them to unprecedented new risks, among which digital gender-based violence is one of the fastest-spreading and most insidiously harmful malignancies.

1.2 The Prominent Issue: Digital Gender-Based Violence – From a Marginal Topic to a Severe Social Challenge

Digital gender-based violence refers to violent acts perpetrated or exacerbated through digital technology based on gender identity, gender expression, or biological sex. Its forms include online sexual harassment, doxing, malicious photo editing, non-consensual sharing of intimate images (NCII), cyberstalking, and gender-based online defamation and insults (Henry, N., & Powell, A., 2018). Compared to traditional violence, it is characterized by anonymity, concealment, rapid and widespread dissemination, persistent and often irreversible harm (the "digital tattoo" effect), and the trend of younger perpetrators.

In recent years, from the shocking incident of the "pink-haired girl" who died by depression induced by online rumors and violence, to the frequent malicious photo editing disputes on campus "confession walls," and to the organized, large-scale shaming and attacks targeting female artists in "fan circle" culture, incidents of digital gender-based violence are commonplace. UN Women has repeatedly issued reports emphasizing that online violence has become a significant obstacle to gender equality globally. Such behaviors not only cause devastating psychological trauma, social isolation, and even life-threatening dangers to victims (especially adolescent girls) but also have a detrimental "desensitizing" and "behavioral modeling" effect on the broad adolescent population as bystanders, imitators, and potential perpetrators. This subtly distorts their perceptions of gender, power, and violent behavior, leading them to mistakenly view malicious acts as "normal" or even "trendy."

1.3 Questioning the Source: Online Film and Television Media – A Key Cultural Arena Shaping Values

Among the various forces shaping adolescents' values and behavioral patterns, mass media, particularly its most popular form—online film and television media (e.g., streaming platform series, online variety shows, short videos)—plays a central role. The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences' "Report on Chinese Adolescents' Internet Use and Protection" indicates that watching online videos is the primary form of online entertainment for adolescents, with considerable daily time consumption.

However, driven by traffic metrics, some online audiovisual content, in pursuit of dramatic conflict and sensory stimulation, is rife with inappropriate portrayals and narrative distortions of digital gender-based violence.

1.3.1 Romanticization and Rationalization of Behavior

In certain "domineering CEO" themed series, the male lead's cyber monitoring and non-consensual filming of the female lead are packaged as manifestations of "deep affection" and "possessiveness," blurring the lines between "persistence" and "harassment," "love" and "control" (Bian Donglei, 2022).

1.3.2 Downplaying or Absence of Consequences

In plots, doxing and online defamation are often simplified into instrumental plot devices; the dramatic nature of the process is severed from the severity of the outcomes, and the real, sustained psychological and social suffering of victims is greatly diluted and ignored within the narrative.

1.3.3 trivialization and Meme-ification of Violence

Numerous variety shows and short video skits enthusiastically create and disseminate "meme" culture, which often includes "pranks" and "jokes" containing body shaming and sexism. This entertaining veneer significantly diminishes the seriousness and harm of violence itself, making it more likely for adolescents to unconsciously imitate it under the guise of "fun" (Chang Jiang, 2022).

1.3.4 Misleading Character Archetypes

Some glorified "positive" or "cool" characters exhibit behavioral pattern intermingled with elements of digital violence, sending extremely dangerous mixed signals to adolescents: that those who use these means can also be powerful, charming, and face no consequences.

1.4 Theoretical Concern: The Black Box from "Viewing" to "Imitation" Needs Opening

Classical communication theories reveal the fundamental pathways of media influence on audiences. Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) posits that individuals learn and imitate behaviors by observing model behaviors and their consequences. Cultivation Theory (Gerbner, 1976) emphasizes that long-term exposure to media symbols shapes audiences' shared perceptions of social reality. However, existing research predominantly focuses on the impact of traditional media violence on offline aggressive behavior (Anderson & Bushman, 2001).

Regarding this new, digital, gendered form of violence situated within online interactive contexts, how is its unique "imitation chain" formed? That is, how do adolescents internalize the symbolic behaviors observed in film and television into their own attitudinal scripts (Huesmann, 1986, Script Theory), overcome moral constraints (Bandura, 1999, Moral Disengagement Theory), and ultimately externalize them into specific practices on social media and within communities? How do the key psychological mediating mechanisms (e.g., reduced empathy, moral disengagement) and external moderating variables (e.g., parental intervention, peer pressure) precisely function? Currently, there is a lack of systematic empirical research within domestic academia to unveil this "black box," resulting in theoretical research lagging behind the rapidly evolving social reality.

1.5 The Urgent Call from Policy and Practice

Facing this severe challenge, the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) and other departments continue to carry out the "Qinglang" (Clear and Bright) series of campaigns, aiming to combat online violence and toxicity. However, the current governance model often focuses on end-point management (e.g., account bans, post deletions), which, while effective temporarily, struggles to eradicate the root cause. If the content of source cultural products is not critically reflected upon, critiqued, and regulated, and if adolescents' own critical media immunity is not effectively enhanced, governance efforts will yield half the result with twice the effort.

Therefore, this study aims to use solid empirical evidence to precisely reveal the intrinsic causal relationship between online audiovisual content and adolescents' imitation of digital gender-based violence. This will provide crucial theoretical basis and decision-making reference for constructing forward-looking content warning and rating mechanisms, designing scientific and effective critical media literacy education curricula, and improving platforms'

content review and social responsibilities. It holds strong practical urgency and social application value.

2 Research Methods

2.1 Content Analysis

2.1.1 Research Subjects

Film and television dramas or variety shows aired between 2020-2025 on mainstream media platforms that involve digital gender-based violence (e.g., online violence, doxing, malicious photo editing, online rumors).

2.1.2 Research Process

Based on synopses, expert recommendations, critiques, and personal viewing, using "individual scenes" as the unit of analysis, all complete scenes containing digital gender-based violence behaviors were extracted from each selected work. A category construction method was used to analyze basic information, types of violent behavior, perpetrator characteristics, victim characteristics, and narrative framing for each work. SPSS was primarily used for frequency analysis, cross-tabulation analysis (Crosstab), chi-square tests, etc., to describe the overall characteristics and patterns of the content. Specific results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Content Analysis of Selected Online Film and Television Media in the Study

Film/TV work	Violence Type	Perpetrator characteristic				Victim characteristics		
		Gender	Relation to victim	Motivation	Social status	Gender	behavior	Reaction after being victimized
Post-truth	Rumor spreading, Online violence	Male	Stranger	Seeking clout, Bandwagoning	Ordinary netizen	Female	Donate her estate after her death	One's reputation was damaged after death
Trending Topic	Online rumors, NCII	Male	Sexual assailant	Revenge, Cover-up	Chairman of the Group	Female	Refuse sexual assault	Attempt suicide
Reset	Doxing	Male	Stranger	Bandwagoning	Ordinary netizen	Female	Lost control of her emotions on the bus due to being harassed by a pervert	Died in a car accident
Caught in the web	Online violence, Doxing	Female	Stranger	Creating news buzz	Have a say in the media	Female	couldn't offer seat to the elderly person because of cancer	Commit suicide

2.1.3 Research Results

After cross-tabulation analysis and chi-square tests on the sample, the following conclusions were drawn: 1. Highly Gendered Narrative: Digital violence is presented as a significant gender issue, with women as the core victim image. 2. De-individualization of Perpetrators: Perpetrators more frequently appear as anonymous, collective "online mobs," reflecting the perception of the collective nature of online violence. 3. Consistent Emphasis on Severity: All works unabashedly depict the devastating consequences of digital violence, aiming to warn and educate rather than downplay the harm. Specific results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Cross-Tabulation of Online Film and Television Media Content Analysis

	Victim Gender		
	Male	Female	Total
Perpetrator gender male	Count	0	1
	%within Perp.gender	0.0%	25.0%
Anonymous/Groups	Count	0	3
	%within Perp.types	0.0%	75.0%
Total	Count	0	4
	% of total	0.0%	100.0%

This table seems to combine perpetrator gender and type. The translation reflects the structure provided, but note the original table might have intended separate rows for Male Perp and Anonymous/Group under a common header like 'Perpetrator Type/Gender'. The percentages here are calculated within each perpetrator type row.

2.2 Questionnaire Survey

2.2.1 Research Subjects

120 junior third-grade students (Grade 9, approx. age 14-15) from a middle school in Chengdu, comprising 39 boys and 81 girls, with an average age of 14 years.

2.2.2 Research Process

A questionnaire titled "The Influence of Online Film and Television Media on Adolescents' Imitation of Digital Gender-Based Violence" was distributed to the 120 students, with 120 valid responses collected. To distinguish the effects of different variables, questions were designed based on: Independent Variable - Media Exposure; Dependent Variable - Intention to Imitate Digital Gender-Based Violence (Behavioral Intention); Mediating Variables (Mediators); Moderating Variables (Moderators); Control Variables.

During the survey process, considering the subjects were minors, ethical considerations were made to protect their physical and mental health and privacy. The questionnaire preamble informed them that the data was solely for research purposes and sought their consent. For questions involving privacy, students could choose to answer freely.

2.2.3 Research Results

Data statistics showed that 75% of the 120 students had watched online film and television works containing digital gender-based violence content.

2.2.3.1 Validity Test (CFA)

All scale factor loadings were >0.5 , indicating good convergent validity.

2.2.3.2 Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

Within the sample, behavioral intention was moderately high overall ($M=3.18$), particularly the intention to participate in attacks under anonymous conditions; empathy ability was generally high ($M=4.25$); moral disengagement and gender stereotype endorsement were relatively low; parental intervention was moderate; peer norms tended to support aggressive behavior. Specific results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis of Variables

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Implication
Media Exposure	3.12	1.05	Moderately High
Moral Disengagement	2.45	0.89	Low
Gender Stereotypes	1.98	0.76	Low
Empathy Ability	4.25	0.82	High
Behavioral Intention	3.18	1.12	Moderately High
Parental Intervention	2.95	1.10	Moderate
Peer Norms	3.28	1.23	Moderately High

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 The Causal Relationship and Degree of Influence Between Digital Gender-Based Violence Content in Online Film and Television Media and Adolescents' Intention to Imitate Such Behaviors

3.2 Research Limitations and Improvement Methods

3.2.1 Limitations

Although this study yielded valuable conclusions, inherent limitations and research gaps exist due to methodological and design constraints. Causal inference has certain limitations. All data were collected at the same time point, only demonstrating "correlation" between variables, not strictly proving "causality." We cannot be entirely certain whether "media exposure" causes higher "behavioral intention," or whether "adolescents predisposed to violence" prefer such content (reverse causality problem). Sample selection has cultural context specificity. The conclusions are based on a sample of Chinese urban high school students; their generalizability needs testing in other cultural contexts (e.g., Western societies) or groups (e.g., rural adolescents, university students).

3.2.2 Improvement Methods

Addressing the above gaps, future research can improve and deepen in the following aspects: Conduct longitudinal panel studies, measuring the same group of adolescents at different time points (e.g., 6 months, 1 year apart). This can test whether "media exposure" at Time 1 predicts changes in "behavioral intention" at Time 2, while controlling for "behavioral intention" at Time 1, greatly strengthening causal arguments. Conduct cross-cultural and cross-group

comparisons, replicating this study among different regions and age groups to test the cultural robustness and group applicability of the model.

4 Conclusion

This study focused on the impact of digital gender-based violence content in online film and television media on adolescents' intention to imitate such behaviors. Using an empirical research method combining content analysis and questionnaire surveys, it systematically explored the causal relationship between them and its underlying mechanisms. The results indicate that adolescents' exposure to audiovisual content containing digital gender-based violence significantly enhances their intention to imitate such behaviors, with moral disengagement and reduced empathy serving as key mediating mechanisms. Effective parental intervention can mitigate the negative impact, while peer norms supporting aggressive behavior exacerbate it. Furthermore, male adolescents exhibited more pronounced effects regarding moral disengagement, suggesting they may be a high-risk group.

This study validates the applicability of Social Learning Theory and Cultivation Theory in the context of digital gender-based violence dissemination and reveals the core roles of moral disengagement and empathy in the "viewing-imitation" chain. The conclusions demonstrate that online audiovisual content is not neutral entertainment but possesses clear value-guiding and behavioral modeling functions, particularly in the romanticized and trivialized portrayal of gender-based violence, which can easily mislead adolescents.

This study holds strong practical significance and policy value. On one hand, it provides empirical evidence for online content rating and warning mechanisms, calling for strengthened review and guidance regarding gender-based violence content in film and television works. On the other hand, it offers direction for targeted critical media literacy education, emphasizing the need to focus on cultivating adolescents' moral judgment and empathy, especially through enhanced guidance and discussion on media use within family and school environments. Furthermore, the research findings can guide platform social responsibility practices and public policy formulation, contributing to the construction of a clearer and healthier online ecological environment and effectively protecting adolescents from the erosion of digital gender-based violence.

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