

***A qualitative study of early adolescents' critical thinking  
about the content and consequences of media violence***

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**ABSTRACT**

Research shows that young people are likely to encounter considerable amounts of violence in the media they use. Some of those depictions trivialize the severity of violence. Past studies show that media literacy education can spur critical thinking regarding violent portrayals in media texts. But rarely do prior studies employ qualitative methods to understand how young media audience members reason through the key question of whether media violence is either surprising or concerning. In the current study, an in-school media literacy program is offered to 48 6th graders who provide data in the form of written responses to a number of critical thinking prompts applied to media texts containing violence. The findings suggest that although most members of the sample readily noticed violent depictions in media texts and could critique the manner in which violence is depicted, relatively few expressed either surprise or concern about those depictions.

**Keywords:** *media violence, media literacy, qualitative research, early adolescents.*



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## INTRODUCTION

Violence in the media has spurred public concern, governmental inquiry, and decades of research in communication, psychology, public health, and other disciplines. Studies have examined how much violence audiences might encounter in the media and whether depictions trivialize, glamorize, or otherwise send a message to audiences that minimizes the severity of violence (Smith et al., 1998). Even with the rise of newer media forms, violence is still a concern, although in those contexts it often takes the form of cyberbullying, hate speech, or incivility (Nagle, 2018). Yet, research also shows that audiences find meaning in violent depictions. Media audiences may reflect on similarities and differences between violent media portrayals and real-life violence and find the questions of morality within violent portrayals thought provoking (Bartsch et al., 2016).

Media literacy education has been put forth, variously, as a way to intervene in the potential influence of media on children and adolescents and/or to better understand how young people make sense of media. Quantitative research typically positions media literacy education as a way to mediate or moderate the effect of media on children and adolescents' knowledge, attitudes, or behaviors (Potter, 2010). Qualitative research tends to illuminate the manner in which young people interpret media practices, texts, or potential audience response, providing insights into the ways in which young people make sense of media (Martens, 2010). Yet, there are also research approaches that blend these foci (Hobbs, 2011; Martens, 2010) or use mixed methods approaches to studying media literacy education (e.g., Tully & Vraga, 2018).

The current study is a qualitative analysis of the written responses to in-school media literacy exercises completed by a sample of early adolescents. The students were asked to determine and reflect upon the amount of aggression or violence they see in media texts in addition to the manner in which that aggression or violence is depicted. They were asked to reflect on whether those observations were expected or surprising and whether they think audiences might be affected. Inductive analysis of students' responses to writing prompts is used in the study to answer the central research question: What can we determine about media literacy education's ability to spur criticality and complexity in students' thinking about media violence? The findings have implications for the possibilities and limits in how parents and caregivers, teachers, or others

can facilitate early adolescents' critical thinking regarding media violence.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Quantities and qualities of media violence

Using a definition of violence that includes acts of intentional physical harm, content analyses have found large and, in some cases, increasing amounts of violence in various media forms. In primetime television, the number of violent acts rose in the 2010s to a total of 5.64 acts per hour (Signorielli et al., 2019). Two thirds of primetime TV programs were shown to contain at least one act of violence (Riddle & Martins, 2020). In children's television programming, violent acts occurred at a rate of 14.1 times per hour (Wilson et al., 2002). Bleakley et al. (2018) determined that violence was the most common health risk behavior examined within a sample of programs most popular among adolescents. Luther and Legg (2010) found 84% of aggressive acts in a sample of television cartoon content were physical in nature.

Other media contain substantial amounts of aggression, as well. Content analyses have found between 57% and 64% of video games rated for general audiences contain violence (Smith et al., 2003; Thompson & Haninger, 2001), and higher instances have been documented in games labeled for teens or mature audiences (Haninger & Thompson, 2004). T for teen and M for Mature rated games contained an average of 4.59 violent interactions per minute in one prior study (Smith et al., 2003). Bleakley et al. (2012) studied 855 top box office grossing films from 1950 to 2006 and found both male and female characters involvement in violence had risen steadily over time. Coyne et al. (2010) found that among movies popular with adolescents, 1990s and 2000s titles showed more physical aggression compared to 1980s.

Yet, simply counting acts of violence may gloss over important differences in how violence is portrayed. In the mid-1990s, the National Television Violence Study (NTVS) was conducted, in which researchers studied not just how much violence occurs on television but how it is depicted (Smith et al., 1998). NTVS researchers developed a list of contextual features of media violence that, according to prior effects research, make some ways of depicting violence more likely to have a negative impact on viewers than others. These include violence depicted as having no or minimal consequences, occurring without cues that would

indicate pain and harm, portrayed as humorous, accompanied by rewards (or simply lack of punishments), presented as justified, shown as realistic as opposed to fantasy-based or cartoonish, and perpetrated by likeable characters. The underlying concern across all of these variables is that violence can be depicted in a manner that deemphasizes its severity. On the flip side, violence can be depicted in a manner that shows its often tragic and horrific impact by avoiding these particular contextual features.

Studies have explored the distribution of violent content with these features in media forms such as video games, TV programs for general audiences, and cartoons. NTVS researchers Wilson et al. (2002) found that children's television contains more rewarded violence than adult programming (32% compared to 21%) and 81% of the violent acts in children's television appeared without consequences. They also determined that approximately three-quarters of the violent acts in children's programming are combined with humor, in contrast to other programming which presents only about one-quarter of violent acts in humorous context. Riddle and Martins (2020) recently updated the NTVS study, using a sample of 688 primetime broadcast and cable programs from the 2016-2017 season. They found that most violent depictions were realistic rather than fantasy-based and 57% depicted harm or pain only in the short term.

Lachlan et al. (2005) studied the first ten minutes of gameplay within a sample of 60 popular games and found that just 10% of the violent acts were perpetrated by likeable characters and there were few instances of "extreme" graphic violence. Yet, approximately two-thirds of the violent acts were coded as justified. In a study of violence encountered in playing *Call of Duty World at War* and *Grand Theft Auto IV* for 28 minutes, Matthews and Weaver (2013) found mild consequences accompanied most acts of violence. The likelihood of seeing consequences like pain and harm was associated with the player's skill level.

McArthur et al. (2000) studied over 2,000 violent incidents in films, and found 44% were lethal, 37% were moderate, and 18% were minimal in severity. They also determined that the consequences of violent events were often missing. Within a sample of 74 G-rated movies, Yokota and Thompson (2000) found violence occupied an average of 9.5 minutes per film and a slight majority (55%) of violence featured "good guys" battling with "bad guys."

We can conclude that there is variation in how violence is depicted in media used by children and teens.

According to the logic of the NTVS, some of those depictions might pose a risk of harm to audiences by minimizing the severity of violence or glamorizing it, whereas other depictions might not. Given this complexity, media literacy education is likely to be useful in encouraging examination and critical analysis of media violence.

### **Critique of media violence depictions within media literacy education**

The National Association of Media Literacy Education (NAMLE) defines media literacy as "the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act on media in all of its forms" and establishes, further, core principles associated with media literacy education. Those principles suggest that media literacy education (MLE) "requires active inquiry and critical thinking about the messages we receive and create" (NAMLE, 2007a, p. 2) and "recognizes that media are a part of culture and function as agents of socialization" (NAMLE, 2007a, p. 5). The principles also state that "people use their individual skills, beliefs and experiences to construct their own meanings from media messages" (NAMLE, 2007a, p. 5). NAMLE suggests that by asking students interacting with media texts questions such as, "Who made this? Why was it made? What ideas, values, information, or points of view are overt? Implied? What is left out that might be important to know? What does this want me to think (or think about)?" (NAMLE, 2007b), critical analysis ensues.

Critical thinking occurs when students put analytical skills to practice independently, outside of the classroom and/or without a guiding adult (Halpern, 1998). Yet, instructors typically must lay a foundation for students' independent critical analysis (Bailin et al., 1999). In media literacy contexts, in particular, critical thinking is often conceptualized in association with comprehension of media messages as constructed realities (Feuerstein, 1999; Sperry, 2010, 2012). The ability to consider the ways in which media representations depart from real-world variation is at the center of such understandings of media literacy education, as is a careful consideration of why those departures matter (Sekarasih et al., 2015).

In keeping with these conceptualizations, media literacy programs on the topic of media violence tend to encourage critical analysis of the ways that media content is depicted. Such an approach has been associated with a host of positive outcomes among children of various ages in prior quantitative studies (Fingar & Jolls, 2014; Huesmann et al., 1983; Krahe &

Busching, 2015; Rivera et al., 2016; Rosenkoetter et al., 2009; Webb & Martin, 2012). Most recently, for instance, Edwards et al. (2019) studied the effects of participation in an intervention on the topic of sexual violence with a media analysis component among high schoolers. Results showed participants became more likely to report that unrealistic media depictions of relationships bothered them in pre- to post-intervention comparisons, whereas members of the control group did not. Participants also showed increased empathy for victims and decreased barriers that prevent bystanders from helping.

Two prior quantitative media literacy studies were designed expressly around recognition of the NTVS contextual features in media texts. In a one-group design with 93 sixth graders, Scharrer (2005) found changes in some critical attitudes about media violence from pre- to post- media literacy participation. Support for the idea that producers “do a good job of showing pain and sorrow” associated with violence decreased, whereas agreement that “TV programs show violence as a necessary way to solve problems” and “Audiences are more likely to copy violence when characters get away with it rather than are punished” increased (Scharrer, 2005, p. 329). In a subsequent study, Scharrer (2006) found increases in comprehension of key concepts in the analysis of media violence – such as lack of consequences and rewards or lack of punishments in violent media depictions – among media literacy participants compared to control group members.

### **Meaning making from violent media content**

A limited number of prior studies use qualitative methods to illuminate how individuals make meaning from violent media content. In those studies, some of the themes central to the NTVS emerge. Shaw (2004), for instance, discovered through in-depth interviews that realistic depictions allow audiences a glimpse into experiences they may not otherwise have and serve as an important reminder of the tragic aspects of violence. Bartsch et al. (2016) found that many interview subjects “discussed the representational relationship of media and reality, including statements about the factual accuracy, realism, and authenticity of people and events portrayed” (p. 751). Focus groups with victims of violence reveal concerns about how audiences might be affected by what they see in violent entertainment media (Schlesinger et al., 1992; 1998). Concern about effects of violence in the news (i.e., becoming anxious or

fearful) was also found among focus group participants in another study (Haara et al., 2019).

A small number of prior qualitative studies have examined young people’s ability to learn about the contextual features of media violence in media literacy education settings. In one such study, responses to the question “How is television violence different from real-life violence?” were examined before and after media literacy participation within a sample of sixth graders (Scharrer, 2005). Students’ answers to the question were more likely to use concepts associated with the NTVS (such as lack of consequences, or rewards/lack of punishments on TV) after media literacy participation. Prior qualitative studies have established, as well, that early adolescents can readily apply the NTVS contextual features to a media clip analyzed together in class (Scharrer, 2006) or to media content of their own choosing (Scharrer & Wortman Raring, 2012).

Sekarasih et al. (2015) asked a group of early adolescent participants in a media literacy program to speculate about why the creators of a media text decided to include violence in the text. The prevalent themes that emerged in responses indicated that students thought violence was appropriate to the genre or the narrative (in other words, violence was important for story telling) and/or was likely to be appealing to audiences. Very few included an explanation for the inclusion of violence that made reference to the profit-seeking incentive of media companies.

## **METHODS**

The data for the current study were derived from an in-school media literacy education program conducted in spring 2019 in a public elementary school in a rural town in the Northeast region of the United States. The participants were students in the three 6<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms at the school. According to the Department of Education website, the school serves a population that is largely White (84.5%), with relatively small percentages of multiracial (7.8%) and Latinx students (7%). The website lists the percentage of students meeting the definition of high needs at 33.4%, students with disabilities at 21.5%, and economically disadvantaged students at 19.7%.

Every sixth grader enrolled in the school was invited to participate, and only those who returned a signed parent/caregiver consent form and indicated their own assent participated. This resulted in 48 students who participated and comprised the present sample, including 15 who identified as female, 21 as male, 2 as

non-binary, and 10 who did not specify gender identity. The majority of students were 11 or 12 years old.

### **The Media Literacy Education Program**

The media literacy program was the latest version of an ongoing, long-term partnership between the first author and the 6<sup>th</sup> grade teachers at the school. The curriculum included four one-hour visits to the school. Facilitators were 10 undergraduate students enrolled in the first author's upper division seminar on Media Violence. These undergraduates opted for an additional civic engagement and service learning credited experience as a supplement to the course and met weekly with the first author to design the curriculum. They also interacted with the liaison teacher at the school to revise the curriculum according to suggestions, and then led the sessions with the sixth graders. The facilitators formed three groups, each assigned to one of the three 6<sup>th</sup>-grade classrooms, in order to establish rapport over the four sessions.

The first session introduced the topic of media literacy and included definitions of media violence and aggression that were discussed and critiqued. In this session, the facilitators shared statistics about the amount and types (physical, verbal, and social forms) of violence that the students might encounter in the media types they use. The second session introduced the NTVS contextual features, presented to the students as "high risk" ways of depicting violence, given that they minimize the severity of violence. The second session is the focus of the current study, and it is described in more detail below. The third session included a critical analysis of gender depictions in violent media, including in superheroes, princesses, and among video game characters. The final session focused on ratings and other means of regulating violence in the media.

### **The current study**

The data for the current study were derived from two exercises conducted during the second session. In the first, a clip from the movie *Shrek* was shown to the 6<sup>th</sup> graders twice, and they responded in writing both times. The clip was chosen based on its PG rating and ongoing popularity among children. In the clip, Shrek and Donkey take on scores of King Farquar's soldiers in a wrestling ring. Set to Joan Jett's song "Bad Reputation," the scene features physical and verbal aggression and demonstrates many of the NTVS "high risk" contextual features of media violence. Shrek, the "good guy"

(NTVS feature) first tries to solve his quarrel with the king non-violently, but then the king orders his men to attack, making Shrek and Donkey's subsequent aggression against those men *justified* in the plot (NTVS feature). The clip contains elements clearly meant to be *humorous* (NTVS feature) as well as acts of aggression that would cause pain and harm in real life but are shown to be free of such *consequences* (NTVS feature) in the scene. At the close of the scene, the crowd cheers for Shrek, the victor of the fight, thereby *rewarding* his aggression (NTVS feature).

After watching the clip for the first time, students were asked to write answers to these questions: How many acts of violence or aggression did you see? Are you surprised to see these acts of violence or aggression in the clip? Why or why not? Students then participated in the discussion about the NTVS "high risk" contextual features of aggressive depictions, with each of the contextual features defined and students providing their own examples of media texts that illustrated each. Afterwards, students watched the *Shrek* clip again and answered these questions: Tally up how many acts of each type of aggression (physical, verbal, and social) that you see now. How many are there of each type? Did you see any of those high risk ways of depicting violence or aggression in the clip? (rewarded, humor, justified, likeable characters, lack of realistic consequences) Which ones did you see? Do you notice more or less acts of violence or aggression after watching a second time? Are you surprised to see these acts of violence or aggression in the clip? Why or why not? Why do you think there are so many acts of violence or aggression? How do you feel now after watching this again? Has your perspective on the media changed? Students' responses were analyzed to determine if the second viewing responses were more complex and/or more critical as well as if they used concepts introduced in the program more frequently.

The second data collection exercise was a homework assignment in which students were given the following prompts: Pick a television program, movie, video game, or YouTube video that you are watching tonight and discuss whether it had physical aggression, verbal aggression, or social aggression. For any aggression that was present, was it depicted humorously or seriously? With or without realistic consequences? Done by the "good guys"? Done for a reason that seemed justified to the character doing the violence? After you've answered these questions, discuss, then, whether you think the program, movie, game, or video depicted violence ethically or unethically and why or why not. This

assignment was given in order to determine whether students could apply the NTVS contextual features to content of their own choosing and do so outside of the context of the in-school media literacy program. Such critical analysis shows autonomy, a key objective of media literacy education (Masterman, 1985), and requires students to balance the pleasure of their own media choices and critique (Sekarasih et al., 2015).

### Data analysis

An inductive thematic analysis was conducted to identify themes and patterns that recurred across the students' written responses. The data include responses to 14 questions from the *Shrek* and homework sheets. Forty-eight students returned *Shrek* worksheets, and 38 students returned homework assignment sheets. In order to present a larger picture of students' meaning making,

the researchers drew links between answers to questions that were similar in nature instead of analyzing and reporting the data by each question. However, not all students answered every question, and not all answers were legible. For each question, only answers that could be comprehended by the researchers were included in the analysis.

The data analysis process had two stages: initial coding and focused coding. In the initial coding, students' responses were open coded line-by-line using the constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and several themes emerged. In the focused coding process, the researchers used the constant comparison method to merge smaller themes into larger ones by comparing their similarities and differences. Table 1 shows the themes that emerged, listed in order of frequency from top to bottom.

Table 1. *Emerging themes (ranked by frequency)*

<i>Shrek</i> clip		Homework on media text of choice
Are you surprised to see these acts of violence or aggression in the clip? Why or why not?	Why do you think there are so many acts of violence or aggression?	Overall, do you think aggression was depicted unethically (in a way that might influence the audience negatively)? Why or why not?
No: narrative justification	To attract audiences	No: lack of realism
No: entertainment justification	Entertainment justification	Yes, for various reasons
Yes, for various reasons	Narrative justification	No: entertainment justification
No, because of the prevalence of violence in society and media in general	To make money	No: it teaches people a moral lesson

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We organize the findings using the classification of the key questions of media literacy education put forth by NAMLE. "Messages and Meanings" have to do with content features of media texts, including techniques used in creating that content, and how they might be comprehended by audiences; "Authors and Audiences" encompass who made the text, for what purpose, and how audiences might be affected (among other topics; NAMLE, 2007b).

### Messages and meanings: Awareness of amount and types of violence

NAMLE's key questions to guide media literacy include questions to pose about media content and meaning construction associated with such content, such as, "What ideas, values, points of view are overt?

Implied? What is left out that might be important to know? What does this want me to think (or think about)?" (NAMLE, 2007b). Answers to these questions reveal students' critical analysis and evaluation of media messages, two key components of media literacy (NAMLE, 2007a). Previous studies produced promising results in that students' awareness and critical attitudes towards media violence both increased after media literacy intervention (Scharrer, 2006; Scharrer & Wortman Raring, 2012). Similarly, in the present study, the majority of students were able to understand the concepts related to media violence depictions and analyze media texts accordingly. This can be seen in students' responses to several questions.

First, students noticed more violence when given the opportunity to closely examine the movie clip. In the *Shrek* worksheet, students were asked to count the acts of violence before and after their in-class discussion. The first time, the average number of violent acts tallied

by students was 18.2. This increased to 25.1 at the second viewing of the clip. The number of violent acts in just a short clip from *Shrek*, then, is considerably higher than the 5.6 acts in primetime and 16.7 acts in Saturday morning children's television programming found per hour in prior analyses (Signorielli, 2008; Signorielli et al., 2019). Importantly, 38 out of 48 students (90%) explicitly noted that they noticed more acts of violence and aggression after watching the clip a second time, indicating the effectiveness of MLE in terms of helping students gain awareness.

Second, students also showed they could identify the "high-risk" ways of depicting media violence in the *Shrek* clip after they discussed these concepts in class. Fourteen out of 48 (29.1%) students noticed all five "high-risk" contextual features introduced in the curriculum that were present in the clip, seven students (14.5%) noticed four, and six (12.5%) three. Nine students (18.8%) noticed none of the "high-risk" ways of portraying violence or did not answer.

Students' choices of media used to complete the homework assignment were classified by media type with a total of 39 cases tallied (one student chose two media texts). The majority of students (n = 12, 31%) chose a U.S. cartoon (e.g., *Tom & Jerry*) to analyze, followed by a video game (n = 8, 21%), and an anime program (n = 5, 13%). The rest of the choices consisted of drama TV series (n = 4, 10%), comedy TV series (n = 4, 10%), movies (n = 2, 5%), YouTube videos about video games (n = 2, 5%), reality TV shows (n = 1, 3%) and humorous YouTube videos (n = 1, 3%).

When studying responses to the homework that asked students to analyze how aggression was depicted in a media text of their choice, we find from students' responses that different genres or types of media tend to depict violence differently (Table 2). This corresponds to conclusions from both the NTVS (Riddle & Martins, 2020; Wilson et al., 2002) as well as with prior findings of varying amounts of "high risk" violence in different media types (Lachlan et al., 2005; Matthews & Weaver, 2013; McArthur et al., 2000; Yokota & Thompson, 2000). For example, in the current data, out of the 12 students who watched cartoons, eight reported that violence was depicted humorously. On the other hand, most students who played video games and watched anime reported violence was depicted seriously. Students found that violence in cartoons and video games was more likely to be depicted without consequences whereas for anime, that was not the case. Video games usually were reported to contain violence that was unjustified whereas most students reported the

violence in anime and cartoons was portrayed as justified.

### **Authors and audiences: Awareness of media production and circulation**

Media literacy is encouraged by answering questions such as, "Who made this? Why was it made? Who is the target audience? Who paid for this?" (NAMLE, 2007b) when encountering a media text. In the current study, many students' responses revealed that they have an awareness of the producer and audience as well as the purpose of media texts. For example, in the *Shrek* assignment, students were asked why there is violence in the clip.

One reason that stood out in students' responses (n = 13) is that violence attracts audiences. Students showed their awareness of the audience by saying: "because the people who create this know that people like violence and that is why they put it in," "to cater to young children, to give excitement," or "so that they try to get people interested so that they want to watch it." Some students, although only a few (n = 3), mentioned the commercial nature of movies. Sample responses include, "Disney wants to make money. The way they are going to get money is if one of their movies becomes very popular," and "To make them (audience) laugh since then they will buy it and make them get \$." These answers demonstrate that some students are aware of the business behind media production with economic incentives for broad audience appeal. Awareness of economic motives of media circulation is an important aspect of media literacy that is often difficult to achieve (Sekarasih et al., 2015).

### **Authors and audiences: Ways that students defend media violence**

We asked the students whether they were surprised to find the number of acts of violence in the *Shrek* clip that they tallied to apply the media literacy question, "How does this make me feel and how do my emotions influence my interpretations of this?" (NAMLE, 2007b).

Despite having counted up so many acts of violence in the short clip from *Shrek*, especially at the second viewing of the clip, most students (n = 30, 63%) reported that they were not surprised about the aggression they found. Nine (19%) reported they were surprised and four (8%) had conflicted views. The remaining students (n = 5) did not indicate whether they were surprised or not.

Table 2. Results from homework sheet

Genre	Was the aggression depicted humorously or seriously?				Was the aggression depicted with or without realistic consequences like pain and harm?				Was the aggression done by likeable characters or unlikeable characters or both?			
	Humorously	Seriously	Both	Total	With	Without	Both	Total	Likeable	Unlikeable	Both	Total
Cartoon	8 (73%)	0	3 (27%)	11	4 (36%)	7 (64%)	0	11	7 (58%)	0	5 (42%)	12
Game	2 (25%)	5 (63%)	1(13%)	8	3 (38%)	5 (63%)	0	8	2 (29%)	3 (43%)	2 (29%)	7
Anime	0	5 (100%)	0	5	3 (60%)	1 (20%)	1 (20%)	5	(60%)	0	2 (40%)	5
Drama TV series	0	4 (100%)	0	4	2 (67%)	0	1 (33%)	3	1 (25%)	0	3 (75%)	4
Comedy TV series	3 (74%)	0	1 (25%)	4	0	4 (100%)	0	4	2 (50%)	0	2 (50%)	4
Movie	0	1 (100%)	0	1	2 (100%)	0	0	2	0	0	2 (100%)	2
YouTube game video	2 (100%)	0	0	2	0	1 (100%)	0	1	1 (100%)	0	0	1
Reality show	0	0	0	0	0	1 (100%)	0	1	0	0	1 (100%)	1
Funny YouTube video	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>16 (44%)</b>	<b>15 (42%)</b>	<b>5 (14%)</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>15 (42%)</b>	<b>19 (53%)</b>	<b>2 (5%)</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>17 (46%)</b>	<b>3 (8%)</b>	<b>17 (46%)</b>	<b>37</b>

Genre	Was the aggression done for a reason that seemed justified to the character being aggressive?			Did the character doing the aggression get rewarded after being aggressive in some way? Did the character get punished? Or did neither happen?				
	Justified	Unjustified	Total	Rewarded	Punished	Neither	Both	Total
Cartoon	8 (73%)	3 (27%)	11	1 (9%)	1 (9%)	7 (64%)	2 (18%)	11
Game	3 (38%)	5 (63%)	8	4 (80%)	0	1 (20%)	0	5
Anime	5 (100%)	0	5	2 (50%)	0	2 (50%)	0	4
Drama TV series	4 (100%)	0	4	0	1 (33%)	2 (67%)	0	3
Comedy TV series	2 (50%)	2 (50%)	4	1 (25%)	0	3 (75%)	0	4
Movie	1 (50%)	1 (50%)	2	0	0	0	1 (100%)	1
YouTube game video	0	0	0	0	0	1 (100%)	0	1
Reality show	0	0	0	0	0	1 (100%)	0	1
Funny YouTube video	0	1 (100%)	1	0	0	1 (100%)	0	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>23 (66%)</b>	<b>12 (34%)</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>8 (26%)</b>	<b>2 (6%)</b>	<b>18 (58%)</b>	<b>3 (10%)</b>	<b>31</b>

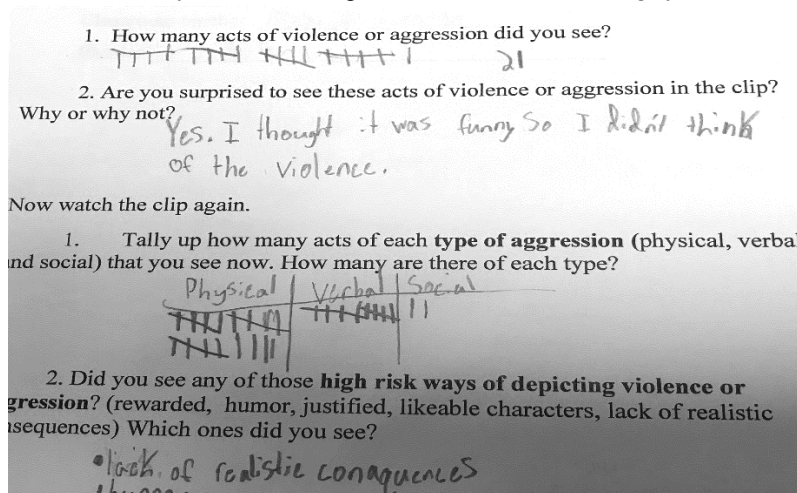


In asking about the potential for media effects to stem from the depictions analyzed by students, we addressed the media literacy questions, “What actions might I take in response to this message? How does this make me feel and how do my emotions influence my interpretation of this? How might different people understand this differently?” (NAMLE, 2007b). Overall, despite the awareness that was achieved in students’ ability to identify amount and types of violent depictions, students often fell short of believing that such depictions have important consequences for audiences. Rather, they found a number of ways to defend the presence of violence in the media and downplay the possibility of effects. The following section shows themes in how students either registered their acceptance (i.e., lack of surprise) regarding violence in media or their lack of concern for potential influence of media violence on the audience.

*Entertainment justification.* The first theme that emerged from students’ answers across both the *Shrek* clip and the homework texts is that violence is often

considered entertaining and humorous, and in having these qualities, its existence is generally accepted. This finding corresponds with Sekarasih et al. (2015), in which the most frequent explanation for why violence is present in media content noted by sixth graders was also for entertainment purposes. In the current study, many students considered humorous violence to be inevitable and some said it enhances the viewing experience. Many students wrote that they were not surprised about the violence they saw in the *Shrek* clip: “No, because it makes the movie more interesting,” “No, because it’s not bad violence. It is for comedy,” “No, it was rather mild violence. Plus, it was in a kid movie and I feel like it was kind of comedic.” One of the students gave a more detailed answer: “Personally, I’m not that surprised to see the acts. Growing up, movies like this intrigued me. I mean, *Shrek* is like the best comedy/family movie. It’s funny and humorous.” In the Figure 1, we see an example of a student who reports that the humor obscured their ability to notice the violence in the clip.

Figure 1. Screenshot of a student’s response to the second viewing of the *Shrek* clip



When students were asked why they think there is violence in the *Shrek* clip, their answers tended to be rather straightforward: “to make people laugh,” “to make it funny,” “for humor and entertainment.” One student distinguished violence and humor in movies from real life: “I think this is because, to me, if there isn’t any violence, things aren’t that funny. But that’s for movies, I don’t really like violence otherwise.” By downplaying media violence as funny, and therefore mild in nature, many students justified its existence.

When asked whether they think the acts of aggression found in media texts of their own choosing for the homework assignment would affect the audience

negatively, the majority of students (n = 25, 74%) said no. Again, the theme of “violence in entertainment media is for fun” was brought up here: “Probably not, because it’s just funny and it’s not like killing someone,” “No, because it comes out as funny and not really harmful,” and “No because all the aggression is for humor.” These answers show that the students were defending media violence by noting its lesser severity compared to real life. A small number of students did not consider violence for entertainment reasons to be a defensible production practice, especially students who critiqued video games. Yet, for most, when asked if audiences would be affected, it was exactly the

entertainment purpose of media violence that they used to downplay that possibility.

*Narrative justification.* Another theme that emerged from both the *Shrek* assignment and the homework is that students often go back to the storyline and characters' backgrounds to support their arguments and defend the presence of media violence. This theme recurred in the answers to several questions. For example, in the *Shrek* assignment, when asked whether they were surprised about the violence in the clip, students responded: "no it's Shrek," "no because I feel an ogre does fight and it was bound to happen," "no

because it is a fight scene," and "no because he's protecting himself." The last question of the *Shrek* assignment asked students why they think there are so many acts of violence in the clip. Some students once again returned to their knowledge of the storyline to justify: "because it's a fight scene;" "because he's an Ogre;" "because he does not want to die." The Figure 2 shows an additional response in which the narrative convention of a fight scene is mentioned as a reason to expect and therefore not be surprised by violence in the *Shrek* clip, in addition to an overall expectation to frequently find violence and aggression in movies.

Figure 2. Screenshot of another student's response to the second viewing of the *Shrek* clip

Watch the clip for the first time.

1. How many acts of violence or aggression did you see?  
III III III III = 12

2. Are you surprised to see these acts of violence or aggression in the clip?  
Why or why not? NO because it was a fight scene and most movies have some violence and aggression.

Now watch the clip again.

1. Tally up how many acts of each type of aggression (physical, verbal, and social) that you see now. How many are there of each type?  
P: IIIIIII IIII  
V: IIIII  
S: 5

2. Did you see any of those high risk ways of depicting violence or aggression? (rewarded, humor, justified, likeable characters, lack of realistic consequences) Which ones did you see?

Similar to the Sekarasih and colleagues' (2015) study, many students accepted the logic of including violence based on the narrative and/or the genre of the text. In one particular response, a student noted, "I wasn't surprised because it's Shrek. They kept a line between hurting people and showing blood. Maybe they try to make it kid-friendly even though it is a pretty high number of harmful actions for children." This quote illustrates an acceptance of aggression in the clip given its non-graphic nature. At the same time, however, it goes deeper into imagining negotiations of what is appropriate for a "kid friendly" film among producers in addition to speculating about potential responses among child audiences.

Students' homework responses revealed similar thinking when applying the analysis to media texts of their own choosing. They generally thought aggression was justified when the plot requires it. This type of answer can be seen across different media types, such as cartoon, anime, drama TV series, etc. For example, students who watched anime or cartoons wrote that the

main characters are fighting to protect somebody, either family or friends: "Yes his family was being hurt badly so it was justified," "Yes, this is because they are protecting their friends in Naruto." A student who watched a TV drama wrote: "yes because he was killing someone that was killing survivors for no reason." Students who played video games said "yes because you have to eliminate characters to win" or "last person standing wins, so I guess it's justified."

Responses that used narrative conventions to justify violence can be interpreted in two different ways. On one hand, they may be considered evidence of the limits to students' understanding of media texts as social constructions, a key facet of media literacy (Feuerstein, 1999; Sperry, 2010, 2012). This is because students seemed to accept narrative decisions to include violence as inevitable rather than imagining storytelling practices that avoid violence or depict it differently. Yet, on the other hand, responses we have coded as narrative justification may be considered illustrations of familiarity with the conventions of genres and

storytelling, therefore constituting positive evidence of students' media literacy (Buckingham, 2003).

*Lack of realism.* A final, but less common reason that students had for believing that violence is not likely to have harmful effects is that the violence is not realistic. For example, a student who watched *Tom and Jerry* for the homework assignment wrote: "No, because they're cats and mice." Students who watched anime reported: "No, because when he was aggressive he has power, so you kind of can't be aggressive in that way," "Not really because 1. It's animated 2. It's not based on anything real 3. It's not that violent." These entries suggest that some students compared media violence with real life violence and rejected the idea that audiences will be negatively impacted.

The NTVS suggests that realistic media depictions *do* pose more of a risk for audiences learning aggression, becoming desensitized, or experiencing a fear response compared to less realistic media depictions (Wilson et al., 2002). In identifying cartoon and anime content as less realistic and therefore less likely to pose a risk, these students showed active meaning making about media texts and audiences. The tendency to critically assess degree of realism in violent media depictions also corresponds to Bartsch et al.'s (2016) and Shaw's (2004) studies with adults.

*Some students did not defend media violence.* There were some students (n = 9, 26%) who did express concern about potential audience effects, reporting many different reasons. One pointed directly to audience effects, saying, "this could definitely empower people to take dangerous action," whereas others considered younger audiences to be most easily affected, e.g., "yes for the younger audiences because they have no sense of what's right or wrong." Some thought the depiction would make the audiences desensitized to violence: "The violence that was depicted was humorous, making the audience less sensitive to violence." Another mentioned that depicting aggression as "it's for fun" and "you won't get hurt" would influence how people perceive aggression in real life. These responses demonstrate the other side of the coin regarding the logic of the NTVS contextual features, that some ways of depicting violence are riskier for audience effects than others (Wilson et al., 2002). Through close reading, the students responding in this manner found aspects of the portrayal of violence that caused them to be concerned about the messages the audience might be receiving.

Likewise, there were also some students (n = 8, 17%) who expressed surprise at the number of violent acts they tallied in the *Shrek* clip, with most pointing to the

young target audience as the reason for this reaction. Sample responses include, "I am surprised to see these actions because it is supposed to be a movie for kids," and "Yes, because it is more for younger kids, not older kids who can deal with more violence." One student remarked on the use of humorous violence as a production technique for reaching young audiences, "I am surprised because it is a kids movie. But they are trying to make it funny."

Finally, a small number of students (n = 4, 8%) were either not surprised or reported mixed feelings about the violence they tallied in the *Shrek* clip, and yet still pointed to the potential for negative effects in their responses. For example, one wrote, "Not at all. It is teaching small children violence and injuring people is funny and good" and another noted, "I used to think it was harmless." The other two students in this small group pointed to the violence in the *Shrek* clip as indication of a wider pattern: "No, because there is so much violence nowadays. It is nonchalant," and "I am not (surprised) because of how much violence there is in the world today."

## CONCLUSION

Overall, this study shows that this sample of sixth grade students was able to understand basic concepts of media violence and learned to notice the amount and types of violence present in various texts. Their written responses to writing prompts showed an awareness of the ways in which creators consider audience appeal in the production and circulation of media texts. However, when they were asked to evaluate these media texts, most of them took a defensive attitude towards potential effects and thought inside rather than pushing against industry logics around audience appeal and storytelling.

These findings must be considered in the context of children's media in which there are many conventions used by media makers to diminish the severity of violence. Children's programming tends to have more humorous violence as well as violence without consequences compared to general audience programming (Wilson et al., 2002). Sander (1997) found that the presence of humor in TV programs is negatively correlated with perceptions of content as constituting violence, a pattern we see reflected in the current study. In the context of children's media, the combination of humor and violence can send mixed messages (Wilson et al., 2002). It can alleviate the tension produced by the violent acts and diminish the likelihood of young audiences seeing potentially disturbing graphic or

realistic violence. But it may also trivialize violence and dehumanize victims. We see widespread acceptance of the practices that produce humorous violence in children's entertainment in students' written responses in the current study.

The students' responses analyzed here show that they tend not to take media violence seriously because of the unrealistic and humorous portrayal of violence compared to violence in real life. This was the case primarily among students who chose to analyze cartoons and games for the homework assignment, whereas students who watched more serious content like TV dramas or anime were more likely to discuss moral lessons of media violence. These patterns connect to the Bartsch et al. (2016) and Shaw (2004) studies which found that audiences find meaning in evaluating the factual, authentic, or realistic nature of media violence.

One of the strengths of a qualitative analysis of individuals' responses to media literacy education is that it is able to identify complexities and contradictions. In the study at hand, students tallied a large number of violent acts present in a media clip and recognized that some features of those acts seemed to minimize or glamorize violence. Yet, most of them did not extend that critique into concern for audience effects. A somewhat similar distinction between young people's ability to critically engage with media texts and their intentions to change their own media behaviors is found in interviews with adolescent girls on the topic of nutrition and social media (Riesmeyer et al., 2019). Adolescents, in particular, may be wary of buying into the notion that they and others their age should be protected from potential media influence.

One limitation in the current research is that, although students provided a wide range of meaningful answers, their written responses were usually quite short and somewhat underdeveloped. Future research can record class discussions, or ask students to express their opinions in a different way, such as recording video or audio instead of writing. Since many students took a defensive attitude towards many of the texts examined in the current study, future MLE might include the analysis of texts that portray violence more realistically and seriously to spur a wider range in students' critical analysis. Of course, screening more severe violence in an in-school media literacy program invites its own ethical questions. Another limitation to this study stems from the small and somewhat homogenous sample. The data for the school in which this study was conducted shows the student population is majority White and somewhat affluent. This, together with the relatively

small number of participants who provided data, certainly limits any ability to generalize. Future research should employ larger and more diverse samples.

Given that violence appears in substantial quantities in media content (Bleakley et al., 2012; Coyne et al., 2010; Haninger & Thompson, 2004; Luther & Legg, 2010; Riddle & Martins, 2020; Signorielli, 2008; Signorielli et al., 2019) and, sometimes, is depicted in a manner that implies that it is inconsequential (Lachlan et al., 2005; Matthews & Weaver, 2013; McArthur et al., 2000; Smith et al., 2002; Yokota & Thompson, 2000), media literacy efforts around media violence are important. Opening up a space for the close and careful consideration of media practices, depictions, and potential audience response allows students to bring new insights to the violence they are likely to encounter in entertainment programming.

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