# Media exposure and fear about crime: An application of mediated fear model.

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## Abstract

**Social behavior can be troubled by the constant concern of crime. Research on the relationship between traditional media crime exposure, social media crime videos and fear about crime is scarce. Present study is designed to investigate whether social media exposure, TV news crime viewing, crime drama exposure is directly and indirectly associated to fear about crime. The theoretical framework of study is based on mediated fear model and cultivation theory. A sample of 371 university students was selected through convenience sampling technique. SPSS 25 was used to analyze the data and Model 4 of Process Macro was used to examine the mediating role of cognitive component of fear of crime (perceived seriousness, perceived risk and perceived control). The results show that television news crime viewing, crime drama and social media crime video exposure is positively associated with fear about crime. Moreover, three cognitive components of fear of crime played a mediatory role between traditional media exposure and fear about crime. In addition to this, relationship between social media crime video exposure and fear about crime was mediated by cognitive component of fear of crime.**

## Introduction

Crime related stories are irrefutable aspect of media today. Previous studies have showed a positive relationship between television news viewing and concern about crime under the framework of cultivation theory [1]. Although the indirect link among television and fear about crime has been explored in many studies, but little attention has been paid that how exposure to social media crime videos is directly and indirectly associated with fear about crime. Moreover, cognitive factors of fear of crime played a mediatory role between the relationship of exposure and concern of crime. In addition to this, less studies have kept their focus on university students because number of studies took the adult as their participants [2]. It is necessary to study this part of population because they spend more time on different media platforms and media helps them to build their ideas, beliefs, values and thinking pattern.

In fact, university students have been taken for this study because they are a unique population to study crime exposure on media exposure and self-protective behavior. Students are the one who are using the traditional and social media to stay update with routine matters. Therefore, students remain concerned with ongoing situation and law and order. Students are major affectees of mobile theft and other street crimes when they return from the home or when they must withdraw the amount from banks. Moreover, students likely experience fear of crime is different than their parents because they are living away from their families [3]. Students as an individual make the effort to stay protective and show avoidance behavior by locking the doors and closing the windows to secure them from any kind of theft.

A number of studies conducted in criminology and other social science disciplines have shown that the cognitive component (perceived risk, perceived control and perceived seriousness) are the major predictor of fear [4]. Therefore, the current study is taking the cognitive component of fear of crime to see that either these components play any role in the context of university students.

Television crime news is taken in this study because a major part of the Pakistani news channel bulletin covers the crime events. These bulletins cover the issue of street crime, theft, sexual violence and target killing. The other genre of television, crime drama showed the reenactment of different crimes which also sensitize the public about the criminal activities happened in their surroundings.

There are three main purposes of the study. First is to examine the relationship between media and fear of crime among university students under the theoretical underpinning of mediated fear model and cultivation theory. Second, the study used all platforms of media which provide exposure to crime related material which includes television news, crime drama, and social media. Second, the study examined the role of new media crime video exposure on the perceived fear of crime among university students. Third, this study has examined the role of the cognitive component to study the outcome variable (fear about crime). Previous studies conducted on the students helps us to understand the media effects and designing strategies to reduce the fear and victimization among university students [5].

## Materials and Methods

According to cultivation theory, television is a main source of socialization and heavy viewers hold a view about the world which resembles with television world [6]. Cultivation theory deals with violence on television and cultivation analysis explores the television contribution in changing people beliefs and values. Television and social media have a lot of content regarding crime, danger, and victimization which ultimate enhance the fear of crime.

In the present study, the researcher took the different genres of television (News and Crime Drama) and different platform (Television and Social Media). Television crime news, crime drama and social media contains high levels of violence because crime creates curiosity and glorify the news stories. A major part of television news deals with murder and assault. Crime shows emphasize the violent content for rating and they function as surrogate for real world experience. In most of cases, when direct experience is missing media play its role through mediated crime and murder stories. Several scholars have criticized the Gerbner assumption of content uniformity and they argued that different genres provide different reality and image of world [7].

In addition to this, some scholars believe that media effects can also be observed in the presence of direct experience. Viewer experience and reinforcement of media messages produce the resonance which force the media user to believe on the mediated reality. If women think that they can become a victim of crime and media reinforced the same thought through their news stories and crime drama, then they become more concerned about the crime in society. On the other hand, if someone personal experience and television stories depict that there are less chances of that person to become a victim of crime, that person feel less risk of crime. Therefore, it is important to investigate and study the association between media crime stories, perceived risk and fear about crime.

Mediated fear model assumes that exposure to media crime stories create mediated reality about the crime and victimization which leads to worry about crime. According to mediated fear model, media exposure is directly associated with increase fear about crime and different cognitive components which includes perceived seriousness, perceived risk and perceived ability to handle the crime play a mediatory role. In mediated fear model, first cognitive predictor is "perceived risk of criminal victimization". Those individuals who are afraid of becoming a victim of crime feels more fear while those individuals who are not afraid of becoming victims feel less risk of victimization. Second cognitive predictor of fear of crime is "perceived vulnerability". In simple words we can say it as perceived ability to control crime. Perceived ability to control is negatively associated with fear of crime because when an individual has strong sense of controlling the crime, the individual shows less worry about crime [8]. Third cognitive factor of worry about crime is "perceived seriousness". Perceived seriousness means to what extant people believes that any incident or a crime story can have impact on their life. High level of perceived seriousness lead to

greater level of fear of crime. There is a positive association between perceived seriousness and fear of crime.

### *Media exposure and fear of crime*

The cognitive predictors are not only part of model, but he recommended that mass media is also part of the model. Therefore, television news exposure, crime drama and social media included in the present study. Moreover, this study also focused on that how cognitive predictors (perceived risk, perceived seriousness and perceived control) are related to exposure of traditional and new media.

Heuristic processing model is most quoted model while explaining the cultivation effect because this model explains the relation of television exposure with judgement. When people make judgement about something, they just cannot retrieve the old information or perception available to them, but they use some heuristic or rule of thumb to make an assessment. Exposure to television and social media provide heuristic to people about the risk and these heuristics are readily available to heavy user of television and social media. The heavy viewers of television are more likely to make estimate about some phenomena which was overrepresented on television. As women are depicted more as victim than men on television, there are more chances that women make their judgments through the available heuristics. While on social media, more videos are available in which men are more likely to become a target of theft in ATM machines and street crimes. Interestingly, women are depicted as extremely vulnerable in different television genres [9].

Based on previous research of cultivation theory and mediated fear model, following model is proposed (Figure 1).
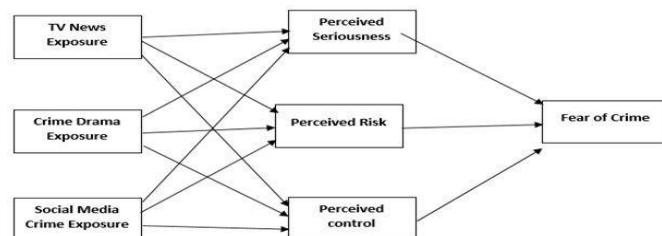


*Figure 1. Predicted model.*

Based on the above literature following hypotheses have been developed.

H1: Television crime news exposure is positively associated with cognitive components of fear (perceived seriousness, perceived risk and perceived control)

H2: Crime Drama exposure is positively associated with cognitive components of fear (perceived seriousness, perceived risk and perceived control).

H3: Social media crime video exposure is positively associated with cognitive components of fear (perceived seriousness, perceived risk, and perceived control).

H4: Cognitive components of fear is positively associated with the fear about crime.

H5: Cognitive components of fear will be mediating the relationship between television news and fear about crime.

H6: Cognitive components of fear will be mediating the relationship between crime drama and fear about crime.

H7: Cognitive components of fear will be mediating the relationship between social media crime video exposure and fear about crime.

### *Theoretical framework*

Using cultivation theory as groundwork, mediated fear model assume that TV crime exposure is indirectly associated with fear about crime. TV exposure can influence real life opinion about crime and this opinion can influence the understanding of worry. TV exposure is associated with one or additional cognitive composing of fear about crime [10]. First related component, individual perceive that specific crime has impact on their life. Individual taking crime seriously are more like to be afraid of that crime. Second related component, Individual who perceive they are going to become a prey of crime, they are extra afraid of prey of a victimization. Third related component, individuals perceive ability to control crime is related to fear about crime.

Perceived risk is only mediator amongst exposure to drama shows and crime news and sexual violence against females. For example, individual perceives that burglary has less impact as compare to warn with a weapon. The individual would have less worry about burglary. For example, females see sexual violence against women, her fear of become a victim increases. It's vital to inspect even if mediated fear model is linked to perceptions of risk, seriousness and control of crime.

Violence as well as crime content are dominant on media. As compare to light viewers, heavy viewers develop a mindset like media content. Due to media content, heavy viewers cultivated overstressed perceptions of danger, fear and victimization and doing so grow "mean world syndrome" called cultivation theory [11].

In this study, crime drama and news are vital genres. Amount of violence in both genres is high. There is common saying about news "if it bleeds, it leads". Violence news becomes leading news story. Reporter over report and highlight assault and violence in a story to create sensation. Similarly, crime drama shows emphasizes on personal violent crime. Media by repetition of the message, strengthen its effects. Media often plays role of proxy for the real-world reality [12]. Individual missing direct crime experience which are many, takes media given reality.

### *Participants*

Participant selected from different universities which have mass communication department. 371 adolescents were selected from Punjab University Lahore, FC College Lahore, University of Lahore, University of Leads, Lahore, University of Management and technology, University of Central Punjab, Beacon House National University. The proportion of boys were slightly smaller (48.6%) than the girls (52.4%) in the

sample. It is possible that mentioned universities have more strength of girls in the class than the boys in mass communication departments. The mean age of boys in the sample was 22.43 (SD=1.84), and for girls mean age was 22.15 (SD=1.67).

### *Data collection procedure*

Data was collected through survey questionnaire. First, questionnaire was prepared and provided to 30 students for pilot testing. After ensuring that respondents can clearly understand the questionnaire, it was distributed to sample. Second, universities were selected, and permission was taken from mass communication departments for study. When permission was granted to enter the university, the researcher visited the different classes to tell the students about the purpose of study and questionnaire was given to students in the presence of their respective teachers. A prior consent was taken from each student. Confidentiality was ensured after collecting the data. Ethical guidelines of university of central Punjab was ensured before conducting the survey in different universities.

### *Mass media exposure*

Exposure to television crime news and crime drama shows was measured by asking the participants to indicate how many hours do you watch television for news and crime drama shows respectively. Overall, respondents watch the television news for almost 1 hours a day and average 30 minutes they spend on crime drama shows. Moreover, respondents spend most of their time on social media apps which includes Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp. To measure the total use time of social media, the time spent on these three apps was summed up and divided by three to get the total social media use time. Respondents spend 2.6 hours on social media (M=2.60, SD=1.20).

### *Mediators*

Perceive seriousness of crime, Perceive ability to crime and Perceive risk of crime will be mediators.

**Perceive seriousness of crime:** Perceive seriousness measurement scale which includes four items. The following crime are included in the list: being robbed in the street, being sexually assaulted, being threatened through a knife or pistol, being attacked/hit/kicked by a stranger in the street.

**Perceive risk of crime:** Perceived risk of crime measurement scale which consists of four items. The following crime are included in the list: being robbed in the street, being sexually assaulted, being threatened through a knife or pistol, being attacked/hit/kicked by a stranger in the street.

**Perceive ability to crime:** The questions related to perceive ability to crime study and the scale consist of four items. The following crime are included in the list: being robbed in the street, being sexually assaulted, being threatened through a knife or pistol, being attacked/hit/kicked by a stranger in the street.

Outcome variables: Outcome variable, fear about crime scale of four items. The following crime are included in the list: being robbed in the street, being sexually assaulted, being threatened through a knife or pistol, being attacked/hit/kicked by a stranger in the street.

## Control variables

Gender, Age, prior victimization, location and material status. Participants were requested to specify their age, ranges from 18(1) to 30 and above (5), gender rangers from male (1) to female (2), Location ranges from urban (1) to rural (2), Prior victimization ranges from yes (1) to no (2) and marital status ranges from single (1) to married (2).

# Results

## Preliminary analysis

A chain of Independent sample t-test was used to analyze the difference between male and female students before examining the model (Table 1 for standard deviations and means). A substantial variance did appear amongst both male and female in their exposure to social media exposure. Males have more social media exposure than females. A significant difference was found between both male and female in their disclosure to News Viewing, with male viewing more news than women. No significant difference was found between the both genders in their crime drama viewing, perceived risk and perceived control. A significant difference was found between both male and female regarding perceived seriousness whereby female participant perceived seriousness greater than men (Table 1 ).

**Table 1.** *Standard deviations, means and independent samples t-test results comparing male and female.*

| Male | | Female | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| M | SD | M | SD | t | df |
| Dependent variables | | | | | |
| Social media exposure | 13.41 | 4.13 | 11.54 | 4.84 | 4.11 | 369 |
| Perceived control | 10.47 | 3.94 | 11.21 | 3.84 | -1.78 | 369 |
| Avoidance behavior | 16.62 | 4.71 | 19.12 | 6.41 | -4.10 | 369 |
| News viewing | 18.84 | 5 | 17.04 | 5.08 | 3.35 | 369 |
| Fear about crime | 9.27 | 3.17 | 10.01 | 3.07 | -2.22 | 369 |
| Perceived seriousness | 10.49 | 3.94 | 11.89 | 4.24 | -3.24 | 369 |
| Perceived risk | 9.72 | 3.63 | 10.1 | 3.78 | -0.97 | 369 |

| Crime drama exposure | 2.92 | 1.08 | 2.99 | 0.94 | -0.6 | 369 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|

Results of correlations showed that TV news crime exposure is positively related with crime drama exposure, perceived seriousness towards crime, perceived ability to control crime, perceived risk of crime and fear about Crime. The results show that H1 has been approved. Crime drama exposure was also positively related with perceived seriousness towards crime, perceived ability to control crime, perceived risk of crime and fear about Crime. The results show that H2 has been approved. Moreover, social media crime video exposure is significantly positively related with TV crime news exposure, crime drama exposure, perceived seriousness, perceived risk, perceived control and fear about crime. This mean that H3 has been approved. Moreover, perceived seriousness was found significantly positive related with perceived control, perceived risk and fear about crime. Perceived Control was found significantly positively related with perceived risk and fear about crime. Perceived risk was insignificantly positively related with perceived control while significantly related with fear about crime. This shows that H4 has been approved (Table 2).

**Table 2.** *Correlation among social media exposure, TV crime news exposure, perceived (risk, control and seriousness) and fear about crime.*

| Variables | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1.Social media crime exposure | 1 | 0.23 | 0.35 | 0.42 | 0.47 | 0.37 | 0.45 |
| 2. TV Crime news exposure | | 1 | 0.26 | 0.32 | 0.30 | 0.39 | 0.41 |
| 3. Crime drama exposure | | | 1 | 0.49 | 0.40 | 0.29 | 0.38 |
| 4. Perceived seriousness | | | | 1 | 0.24 | 0.27 | 0.30 |
| 5. Perceived risk | | | | | 1 | 0.36 | 0.31 |
| 6. Perceived control | | | | | | 1 | 0.49 |
| 7. Fear About Crime | | | | | | | 1 |

After conducting the analysis of Independent Sample T-test and correlation, the researcher tested the simple mediation model through SPSS macro Process model 4.

In this model testing, three variables were dealt as mediators which include perceived seriousness, perceived risk and perceived control. Three model were tested in which first model was tested by taking social media crime exposure as independent variable and fear of crime as dependent variable.

In second model, TV crime news was taken as independent variable and fear about crime as dependent variable. In model three, crime drama exposure was taken as independent variable and fear about crime wad dependent variable. In all three models, perceived seriousness, perceived risk and perceived control remained as mediating variable.
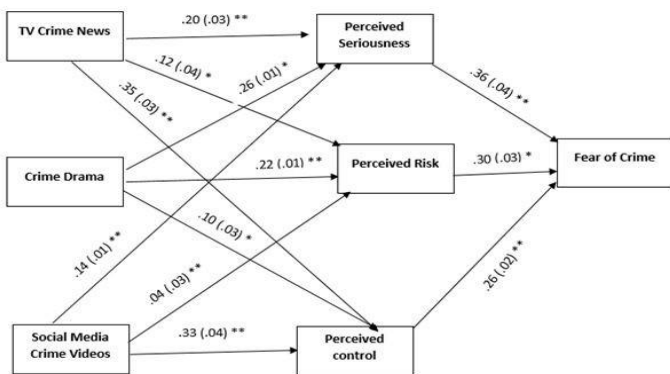


*Figure 2. Testing of mediation model.*

The above (Figure 2) shows the results from the process model. These results were obtained after controlling the gender, age, income and direct experience of crime. The standardized beta values show that higher exposure to television crime news (b=0.20, p<0.01), social media crime videos (b=0.14, p<0.01), and crime drama (b=0.26, p<0.01) have higher level of perceived seriousness. Moreover, the results show that higher exposure to television crime news (b=0.12, p<0.01), social media crime videos (b=0.04, p<0.01), and crime drama (b=0.22, p<0.01) have higher level of perceived risk. In addition to this, direct effects show that higher exposure to television crime news (b=0.35, p<0.01), social media crime videos (b=0.33, p<0.01), and crime drama (b=0.10, p<0.01) have higher level of perceived control. The direct effect of television crime news, social media crime videos and crime drama on fear about crime was also significant.

The specific indirect effect of television crime news on fear about crime was mediated by perceived seriousness (b=0.05, SE=0.02, 95% CI [0.02, 0.07] perceived risk (b=0.03, SE=0.001, 95% CI [-0.05, -0.01] and perceived control (b=0.03, SE=0.001, 95% CI [-0.05, -0.01]. The results are showing that watching of television crime news led to higher level of perceived seriousness, risk and control. These results are in support with the H5.

The specific indirect effect of crime drama on fear about crime was mediated by perceived seriousness (b=-0.03, SE=0.02, 95% CI [-0.09, -0.02] perceived risk (b=0.01, SE=0.008, 95% CI [0.002, 0.035] and perceived control (b=-0.07, SE=0.003, 95% CI [-0.01, -0.05]. The results further indicate that more exposure to crime drama led to lower level of seriousness and perceived control while higher level of perceived risk. These results are in the support of hypothesis 6.

The specific indirect effect of social media crime videos on fear about crime was also mediated by perceived seriousness (b=0.02, SE=0.03, 95% CI [-0.02, -0.09] perceived risk (b=0.05, SE=0.024, 95% CI [0.07, 0.10] and perceived control (b=0.05, SE=0.004, 95% CI [-0.06, -0.02]. The results indicate that higher level of social media crime video exposure led to higher level of risk, seriousness and control.

## Discussion

This study is important in two ways. First, study included the university students because less researches are available in which university students has been taken as participant to find out the relationship between media crime watching and fear about crime. Its hard to overlook the university students because they consume the media more often and they are most vulnerable than other population. Second, this study included the traditional and social media in the study which has not been explored before. Social media is becoming popular in young generation and they spent most of their time on social media websites/apps [13].

Findings of this study shows that traditional media crime exposure (news and crime drama) and social media crime videos are positively related with fear about crime. The viewers of crime drama attach and identify themselves with drama characters [14]. When a character becomes a victim the viewer also think that he/she can also become a victim of crime. Through this way, media exposure cultivates the risk and perceived seriousness among the viewer.

The result of this study is in favor with the mediated fear model which states that media crime exposure and fear about crime is mediated by perceived seriousness, risk and control. Our study results show that these three variables are significant mediator. Other studies have also showed the same results [15].

## Conclusion

Repeated violence message can influence your perception about criminal victimization. Our results found that all three mediators (Perceived Control, Perceived Risk, Perceived Seriousness) was one way or other found significant mediator between television crime exposure and fear about crime. It can be possible that perception about criminal victimization (Perceived Control, Risk and Seriousness) of students may differ from different life stage. Finally, findings of this study can be used to help reduce fear of crime in students by providing professional counseling and making atmosphere around students safer.

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