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Impact of Graphic Images and Violence on Audience Psychology and Risk Perception

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Abstract: *The rapid spread of unfiltered graphic images and violent content on X (formerly Twitter), especially depictions of violence against children, raises concern about effects on audience psychology and risk perception in Nigeria. This study examined the impact of repeated exposure to such content on the psychological states and risk perceptions of Nigerian undergraduate students, and assessed their attitudes toward its circulation. Anchored on the General Aggression Model, the study employed a quantitative cross-sectional survey design. Using multistage cluster sampling, 368 questionnaires were administered to students in Mass Communication, Political Science and International Relations, and Criminology and Security Studies at Caleb University, Lagos. A total of 313 valid responses (85% response rate) were analysed with descriptive statistics. Findings showed adverse psychological effects: 76.0% reported anxiety or fear, 77.9% sadness or grief, and 70.0% desensitisation. Risk perception rose markedly, with 82.4% becoming more protective of children, 79.2% viewing community children as at higher risk, and 68.4% reporting reduced institutional trust. Attitudes were mixed; 79.5% favoured content restriction and 76.7% supported accountability for sharers, yet only 40.3% had reported such content, revealing an attitude–behaviour gap. The study concludes that repeated exposure harms psychological well-being and heightens risk perception among young Nigerian users. It recommends stronger platform moderation, accessible reporting tools, media-literacy programmes, institutional trust-building efforts, and ethical advocacy guidelines that avoid graphic imagery.*

Keywords: *Graphic images; Social Media; Violence; Audience Psychology; Risk Perception; X (Twitter); Children*

I. Introduction

The era of visual communication has come to define the way people are informed in the modern world, and graphic images and violence are now commanding more power than ever to impact audience psychology and perceptions of risk (Akintayo & Aondover, 2025). The graphic images created to vividly and sometimes shockingly show injury, death, destruction and/or human suffering can attract attention, arouse high emotions and impact the threats environment that people perceive in their lives. Strong emotional and psychological responses are often evoked by violent media content, whether reallife or fictional, which in turn impact evaluations of personal safety and risks of daily life (Holman et al., 2024). Traditional broadcast news or print media were a key source for audiences to see violent and graphic images in the past, when exposure was controlled by editorial gatekeeping in terms of when and how it was seen.

But, with the rise of digital platforms and social media, this changed, to the extent that the quantity and speed of exposure has been multiplied exponentially. X (previously Twitter) has become one of the most powerful social media for the rapid spread of unmediated graphic content. Airaoje et al. (2025) observed that real-time nature, algorithmic boost of emotional

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information and almost no content regulation has made it a main stream of raw, unfiltered footage of violence, accidents, terrorist attacks and conflict zones. As part of the "citizen journalism" culture, X's trending algorithms tend to favour graphics, leading to viewers being shown horrific images in multiple formats throughout the day, often more than once, and drowning out the traditional news report experience of viewing events at a distance (Akintayo & Aondover, 2025).

Studies have shown that repeated viewing of images of violence and death in the media is an independent risk factor for increased stress symptoms, post-traumatic stress reactions, and psychological deterioration (Airaoje et al., 2025). It is alarming that psychological effects from media coverage of such events can sometimes be stronger than the psychological impact of being physically exposed to the event (Holman et al., 2014; Holman et al., 2024). In certain instances, such as violence against children, this type of graphic material has special psychological significance, a fact that should be taken into account. The images and videos that depict child abuse, child soldiers, children caught in a war zone or children suffering from violence raise a stronger emotional reaction from society because of the notion of children's innocence that is protected and the universal perception of children's vulnerability (Akintayo et al., 2026). Viewers may be left with a sense of profound distress, moral injury and psychological scarring, as well as a fundamental redirection of views on risk and safety in their own communities as a result of such content.

Graphic footage is often used in the name of journalistic duty and the right to know about "sensational events" like war crimes, disasters and accidents. In some regards, however, the psychological effects of viewing such content are still very much up for debate (Awofadeju & Akintayo, 2026). Although some people say that the use of graphic videos will increase knowledge and promote protective behavior, there is substantial research documenting the negative effects: increased anxiety, fear generation, emotional distress, compassion fatigue, and skewed risk assessments (Akintayo & Ajayi, 2025). These detrimental impacts are especially vulnerable among children, teens and people with preexisting mental health issues (Ruhl Ibarra et al., 2025).

While risk perception is an objective phenomenon, it is not completely objective but rather influenced by media framing, emotional arousal, and cognitive heuristics like the availability heuristic. The experienced threat level is greatly magnified when dramatic media images dominate the individual's mental awareness (Maradun & Aondover, 2025). Surprisingly, exposure to graphic violence can lead to exaggerated fear and avoidance responses, yet can eventually lead to desensitisation, where the person becomes less emotionally affected, has less empathy and violence becomes more normal. The representation of children as victims adds to the complexity, as the audience may be more protective than ever, but eventually get numb to it, which can lead to reduced collective responsibility for children's welfare (Akintayo & Aondover, 2025).

The rapid proliferation of social media in Nigeria, and in other developing media environments, has led to unprecedented access to violent and graphic content, such as videos of accidents, crime scenes, terror attacks, and communal conflicts that are all unregulated (Ahmed & Msughter, 2022). The trending content is commonly found on X because it has little to no editorial control and algorithmically promotes trending content, making it a prime channel for Nigerians to see such content. The user base of the platform is also youthful, as the majority of the users in Nigeria are between 18 and 34 years old, who are particularly susceptible to the psychology of 'graphic'. A particular concern is the spread of such content

about violence against children, either in connection with insurgency, communal violence or domestic violence, which has been prevalent on X without regard for the psychological effects on viewers and the effect this has had on the general perception of threats to children's safety for Nigerians (Airaoje et al., 2025).

In this context, the present study explores the psychological effect that graphic and violent media content, and in this case the content of X (previously Twitter), has on the audience and on how the audience perceives risk, especially the risk of violence towards children. The emphasis is on repeated exposures, which have been shown to impact on emotional responses, threat processing, behavioural intentions in the Nigerian context.

1.1 Problem Statement

In recent years, users of social media platforms have seen an increasing and difficult volume of unsettling and violent content. In particular, X (previously Twitter) has seen a growth in the speed and reach of graphic content and unedited content, sometimes without the same system of checks and balances found in mainstream media, which may have historically been in charge of removing violent imagery (Airaoje et al., 2024). The materials may be used to disseminate information or bring attention to important issues, but they may also have a significant and unanticipated effect on the audience.

The spread of information regarding child abuse is one of the phenomenon's most unsettling features. When children are depicted in pictures and movies as victims of terrorism, war, violence, abuse, and exploitation, their emotional responses differ significantly from those of adult victims. The audience has powerful psychological reactions because children's innocence is broken, they seem defenseless, and societal norms require that youngsters be protected (Airaoje et al., 2023). However, the same emotions that might make kids feel surprised, depressed, furious, and powerless can also lead to psychological stress and change how youngsters perceive risk in their own communities.

The fundamental worry is whether those who regularly encounter violent and explicit images of child maltreatment would develop some unfavorable psychological repercussions, such as increased dread, anxiety, and emotional disturbance, or paradoxical emotional numbness and indifference Airaoje et al., 2024). These emotions can then influence people's perceptions of what is safe in their surroundings, causing them to become dangerously indifferent due to desensitization or to worry excessively about the safety of their children. Despite these objections, there is still insufficient consensus regarding the scope and nature of these impacts, particularly with regard to culture and various media contexts. Furthermore, despite the fact that media violence has been extensively researched worldwide, the most of the studies have been carried out in western media environments, whereas there are numerous differences in emerging media environments like Nigeria (Awofadeju & Akintayo, 2023). Moreover, although media violence is a well-studied phenomenon internationally, the bulk of the research has been conducted in western media environments, whereas in developing media environments like Nigeria, there are many variations in media literacy levels and the regulatory system varies considerably.

This is especially true when it comes to children's exposure to violence, which may be moderated by cultural variations in childrearing standards, ideas about childhood, and society reactions to child abuse. Policymakers, educators, and mental health professionals lack evidence to support their decisions regarding the issue of graphic content on X in the absence of context-specific studies (Aliough et al., 2023). Age, past exposure history, emotional coping

skills, and media literacy all affect how people react to graphic content. However, little is known about how these aspects combine and how that affects risk perception, particularly when the theme involves a kid victim (Airaoje et al., 2025). Research on the overall impacts of media violence may not fully account for these

The interaction between these factors and its effects on risk perception, however, is poorly understood, especially when the thematic is a child victim in particular (Aondover et al., 2024). Existing studies on the general effects of media violence may not capture these emotional and moral aspects of child victimization, which can enhance or complicate the individual differences outlined above. Thus, the following central questions are explored in this study: Do repeated exposures to graphic images and violent depictions of violence against children on X (formerly known as Twitter) impact psychological state of the audience and risk perceptions? Are the attitudes of users of X (formerly Twitter) regarding the spreading of graphic and violent material related to child violence?

1.2 Research Questions

a. What effect does repeated exposure to graphic images and violent content depicting violence against children have on audience psychological states?
b. How does repeated exposure to graphic and violent content involving children influence audience risk perception?
c. What are audience attitudes towards the circulation of graphic and violent content depicting violence against children on X (formerly Twitter)?

1.3 The Concept of Audience Risk Perception

Risk perception is important to both cognitive psychology and mass communication. It is an individual's subjective view of what type of danger there is and how severe and likely that danger is. It is not a statistically measurable construct of psychometrics. It is rather perceptive of personal experience and shaped by social involvement and the messages that are absorbed to and from the media and other social institutions (Kurfi et al., 2021). Risk perception works as an internal cognitive map of safety and danger in appraisal of the social environment. There are two cognitive systems in the human brain for processing information about a danger. The fast, instinctive, and emotional experiential system is ungoverned and centered in the amygdala. It is a survival pathway; once a viewer is exposed to a gory image of blood, abuse, physical trauma or any other such disturbing image, this system will produce fear and anxiety and a feeling of vulnerability long before a logical processing of the information is done. By contrast, the analytical system is a slower, more deliberate path of objectively framed and statistically reasoned information. It is also a part of the prefrontal cortex.

In a media environment full of disturbing imagery, the analytical system is often bypassed by the experiential system (Obada et al., 2024). In a system that is designed to view the vivid and emotionally charged images as reality, repeated exposure to violent graphic content will lead the user to a systematic error in risk assessment, in which the user will perceive that danger and threats are more real and likely than they are in reality.

Garfin et al. (2022) analyze the long-term consequences media consumption has on the perception of risk in crisis situations. They conclude that more media engagement causes the public to think they are more at risk, which causes sustained anxiety. They also argue that risk perception influenced by the media particularly drives maladaptive behavior and causes people to engage in safety behaviors that are out of proportion to the situation and engage in panic behavior that disrupts adaptive coping.

Li and Zhong (2022) build on this idea by explaining that the cumulative consequence of media consumption causes risk perception, emotions, and behavior to become unbalanced. They argue that the routine media consumption of the public works as a cumulative environmental indicator, which the brain interprets as a signal of sustained low levels of safety. For instance, people who often scroll through violent posts and feel anxiety promote panic behavior. Highly frequent exposure to danger and violence creates a self-enforcing cycle of anxiety, which promotes a heightened sense of danger and causes maladaptive behaviors.

The proliferation of disturbing child abuse videos across X in Nigeria serves as an example of these elements in action. Constantly being exposed to videos of abused domestic workers and other assaulted children is not news to Nigerian audiences. The videos are stimuli that influence emotions. Based on the mechanisms outlined by Garfin et al. (2022) and Li and Zhong (2022), these stimuli would generally raise Nigerian audiences' awareness of danger. This is especially true for the risk children are facing in domestic service situations.

II. Review of Literature

The theoretical basis for our study is grounded in two converging theories that should together explain the short-term episodic and long-term cumulative effects of graphic media violence on viewer psyches that we hypothesize to occur: the General Aggression Model and Social Cognitive Theory. One theoretical perspective would be inadequate to explain the multitiered influence of visual trauma operating in real time as temporary bursts of emotion/physiology and over the long-term as the construction of worldviews. These two theories collectively attempt to explain how viewing graphic images of child-specific violence on X leads to episodic and chronic shifts in perception of risk (Obada et al., 2021).

2.1 The General Aggression Model

The General Aggression Model (GAM) is a biopsychosocial theory developed and supported by Anderson and Bushman (2017, 2018). It aims to explain how exposure to graphic media content affects individuals both short- and long-term. GAM stands out in its ability to integrate such social-cognitive theories as Berkowitz's cognitive neoassociation theory, Bandura's social learning theory, and Huesmann's script theory into one conceptual framework.

GAM suggests that viewing media content is part of a broader social-cognitive process occurring every time an individual engages with any social environment. An input, which comes in two forms, personal and situational, triggers cognitive, affective, and arousal responses within the viewer changing their psychological state. Personal factors refer to those variables specific to each viewer, such as one's age, gender, and cultural background, as well as their attitudes, traits, and general behavior. Situational factors relate to the context of media exposure; in this case, it is the sudden encounter with the graphic content on X.

Both factors add up and influence the consumption of graphic content on three internal channels (routes). First, the cognitive route processes the input and activates one's hostile thoughts and scripts stored in long-term memory (Anderson & Bushman, 2017). The viewer

begins to associate the media content with aggression-related cues, such as blood or injuries. Second, the affective route is responsible for the immediate emotional response to the input. One's emotions range from relaxation or pleasure to negative valence emotions of fear, horror, disgust, or anger (Anderson & Bushman, 2018). Third, the arousal route embodies a physiological response to the input as the viewer's body prepares for potential danger. One's heart rate and blood pressure increase, as well as galvanic skin response, and cortisol (the stress hormone) spikes (Anderson & Bushman, 2018).

As a result of the three routes' activation, the viewer's long- and short-term psychological state changes. Short-term effects are explained by the two-step appraisal process, while long-term effects determine the viewer's behavioral response to graphic content. In the first step of the appraisal process, which is conducted automatically and unconsciously, the brain evaluates the environment using the internal state as a reference point (Anderson & Bushman, 2018). As a result, the individual either recognizes the input as a threat or not. If the resources are available, the second step occurs, and the person reappraises the situation consciously and more comprehensively. If the content's initial impact is strong, or the viewer continues to be exposed to the graphic content, their internal state will remain aroused. Therefore, the person will stay in the automatic form of appraisal and will not be able to analyze their emotions rationally (Anderson & Bushman, 2018).

A behavioral response, which is the result of appraisal, depends on whether the viewer sees the content as a threat or not. If they do, they are likely to have negative emotions toward the media source. Additionally, if the person has positive emotions towards the source of the threat, such emotions will be negative towards the target, which is often the self or an individual in the threatening act (Anderson & Bushman, 2018). In case the individual does not see graphic content as a threat, they are likely to gain cognitive resources and have a more comprehensive appraisal of the situation and their emotions regarding it. This part of the model shows why sudden exposure to graphic content can have negative effects; thus, the importance of media literacy in modern society.

2.2 Population of the study

The population of this study comprised all registered undergraduate students of Caleb University Imota Lagos. This institution boasts of hosting a wide range of faculties including the College of Arts, Social and Management Sciences (CASMAS) and the College of Pure and Applied Sciences (COPAS) among others where students are not only encouraged to interact among themselves but also engage in activities ranging from watching on television, mainstream media and modern social media sites for content. Thus, the target population of this study was drawn from the total number of registered undergraduate students in Caleb University Imota Lagos which according to recent surveys and statistics from the university registry stands at 4548 students.

2.3 Sample Size

According to Pritha (2021), sample size refers to the segment of the population chosen for a study or survey through an appropriate sampling technique. Essentially, it represents a portion of the research population that is adequate to reflect the population as a whole. The sample size for this research is 381 respondents that were drawn from six schools across the polytechnic, with at least two departments representing each school. This sample size was gotten through the Taro Yamane Formula:

N

$$n = \frac{}{1 + N\,(e)^{2}}$$

Where:
n = Sample size
N = Population of the study (4,548)
e = Tolerable error margin (5% or 0.05)
1 = Constant
4,548

$$n = \frac{}{1 + 4548(0.05)^{2}}$$

$$n = \frac{4,548}{1 + 4548(0.0025)}$$

$$n = \frac{4,548}{1 + 11.37}$$

$$n = \frac{4,548}{12.37}$$

n = 367.74
n = 368

2.4 Sampling Technique

This study adopts a multistage cluster sampling technique. Multistage sampling is highly appropriate when the target population is large, geographically dispersed, or naturally structured into distinct institutional clusters, such as colleges and departments (Babbie, 2020). The sampling process for this study will be systematically executed in three distinct stages:

a. Stage One (Selection of College): The study purposefully isolates the College of Arts, Social, and Management Sciences (CASMAS). This college is selected because its academic disciplines are deeply anchored in media consumption, behavioral psychology, political culture, and social interpretation, making its student body highly relevant to the variables being measured.
b. Stage Two (Selection of Departments): From within CASMAS, three relevant departments are selected as clusters to represent the student audience. These are the

2.4 Department of Mass Communication, the Department of Political Science and

International Relations, and the Department of Criminology and Security Studies. These specific departments are selected because their students possess a heightened academic awareness of media content, global threat assessment, and risk perception dynamics.

a. Stage Three (Distribution and Selection of Respondents): The overall sample size of 368 determined per statistical rules will be divided between the three selected departments in proportion to their respective student enrollment populations. Lastly, the researcher will conduct simple random sampling in each department during common lecture times for the distribution of questionnaires to the students who meet the inclusion criteria.
b. This multistage cluster sampling plan helps the researcher to overcome campus logistics issues, provide fair representation of the three departments, and reduce sampling bias.

III. Research Methods

3.1 Instrument for data collection

Data are collected using a structured questionnaire administered physically and, where necessary, electronically. Questionnaires are suitable for collecting large volumes of standardized data efficiently (Babbie, 2020).

Section A: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 4.1 Age Distribution of Respondents

Response	Frequency	Percent (%)
18–21 years	88	28.1%
22–25 years	124	39.6%
26–30 years	68	21.7%
31–35 years	33	10.5%
Total	313	100.0%

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Analysis: According to Table 4.1, most of the study participants were aged between 22 and 25 years (39.6%). The second-largest group comprised those aged 18-21 years (28.1%), followed by respondents aged 26-30 years (21.7%). Only 10.5% of the study participants were aged between 31 and 35 years. Thus, the largest portion of the study sample consisted of respondents aged 1825 years (67.7%). This distribution aligns with the study's target population. The prevalence of young people in the study sample can be explained by the fact that this population is highly represented among X's users in Nigeria. Moreover, young people are more likely to consume short videos on a regular basis compared to older people, which makes them more susceptible to encountering graphic content featuring violence against children.

Table 4.2 Gender Distribution of Respondents

Response	Frequency	Percent (%)
Male	142	45.4%
Female	165	52.7%
Prefer not to say	6	1.9%
Total	313	100.0%

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Analysis: The data from Table 4.2 presents that female respondents comprised the majority of the study's participants, accounting for 52.7%. Male respondents represented 45.4%, and 1.9% declined to identify their gender. The distribution of the sample is close to being equal, and thus, the results of the study reflecting the influence of psychological factors and risk are not biased toward either gender.

Table 4.3 Departmental Distribution of Respondents

Response	Frequency	Percent (%)
Mass Communication	132	42.2%
Political Science & International Relations	96	30.7%
Criminology & Security Studies	85	27.2%
Total	313	100.0%

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Analysis: Table 4.3 indicates that the respondents who belonged to the Department of Mass Communication were the highest sampled group of participants (42.2%). The two other departments were Political Science and International Relations (30.7%) and Criminology and Security Studies (27.2%). The distribution of respondents among the three clusters was done according to the multistage sampling procedure as explained in Chapter Three. All respondents who were involved in the study were considered adequate since they were students with high exposure to areas of studies related to media, governance, and security.

Table 4.4 Level of Study of Respondents

Response	Frequency	Percent (%)
100 Level	100	31.9%
200 Level	90	28.8%
300 Level	70	22.4%
Response	**Frequency**	**Percent (%)**
400 Level	53	16.9%
Total	313	100.0%

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Analysis: According to Table 4.4, the largest number of respondents (31.9%) represent the 100 Level, followed by 200 Level (28.8%), 300 Level (22.4%), and 400 Level (16.9%). The distribution pattern indicates that the views expressed above are representative of opinions of Undergraduate students at different academic and social stages since media literacy and critical evaluation skills become increasingly important at higher stages of education.

Table 4.5 Frequency of X Usage Among Respondents

Response	Frequency	Percent (%)
Multiple times daily	210	67.1%
Several times a week	70	22.4%
Once a week	23	7.3%

Rarely	10	3.2%
Total	313	100.0%

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Analysis: Table 4.5 presents the statistical data on the frequency of use of the social media platform by the selected sample of undergraduate students. Accordingly, 67.1% of respondents use X several times a day, while 22.4% resort to it multiple times a week. Moreover, 7.3% of undergraduate students use the social media platform once a week, and 3.2% have a rare interest in X. Thus, the significant number of individuals in the sample use this social media network in a short interval, which explains its choice for this study since the frequency of use increases the likelihood of encountering violent and graphic material.

Table 4.6 Frequency of Encountering Graphic Content Depicting Violence Against Children on X

Response	Frequency	Percent (%)
Several times daily	75	24.0%
A few times a week	110	35.1%
About once a week	72	23.0%
Rarely, but has occurred	56	17.9%
Total	313	100.0%

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Analysis: Table 4.6 reports that 24.0% of respondents see graphic content involving the victimisation of children on X several times a day, with 35.1% encountering the same several times a week, the greatest category, and 23.0% seeing such content about once a week. Meanwhile, 17.9% of respondents only rarely encounter graphic content involving the victimisation of children. Overall, 82.1% of respondents encounter this category of content at least once a week, meaning that the majority of respondents experience such content on a regular basis, as a result of the platform's autoplay and infinite-scroll mechanisms, as discussed in Chapter Two.

Section B: Psychological Effects of Repeated Exposure to Graphic Content Depicting Violence Against Children

Table 4.7 Repeated Exposure Makes Respondents Feel Anxious or Afraid

Response	Frequency	Percent (%)
Strongly Agree	120	38.3%
Agree	118	37.7%
Neutral	40	12.8%
Disagree	25	8.0%

Strongly Disagree	10	3.2%
Total	313	100.0%

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Analysis: Table 4.7 reflects respondents' perceptions of whether repeatedly seeing violent content against children on the social media platform would make them feel anxious or fearful. Among the 313 participants, 120 strongly agreed and 118 agreed, making the total percentage of positive responses equal to 76.0%. Meanwhile, 40 were neutral, 25 disagreed, and 10 strongly disagreed, summing up to 11.2% of negative responses.

The data demonstrate that most respondents felt anxiety or fear when exposed to violent content on social media. The strong agreement with the statement reflects the prevalence of such emotions and implies that they are common among university students. The obtained results verify that the audience of X is vulnerable to graphic content, and such material may have negative psychological consequences for its viewers.

The findings support the literature on vicarious trauma triggered by the view of violent content. Researchers have revealed that repeated exposure to child violence increases the risk of anxiety, fear, and other psychological symptoms in adults (Goodwin et al., 2013; Stewart, 2022). Indeed, the study's participants reported feeling anxious after seeing such content on social media. Multiple researchers have also demonstrated that exposure to graphic material is frequent on the platform due to its algorithm and is harmful to the mental health of the audience (Stewart, 2022; Goodwin et al., 2013). In such a manner, the study's results align with previous findings on vicarious trauma after exposure to violent content on social media. In general, the study's results prove that repeated exposure increases the risk of developing anxiety and other negative emotions in young adults, and such material is dangerous to the mental health of the X audience.

However, the study's results contradict the literature on exposure to violence leading to desensitization. Researchers have suggested that repeated viewings of violent content reduce emotional arousal and prevent negative psychological consequences (Mrug et al., 2016; Krahe et al., 2011). However, the study's participants strongly disagreed with the statement on desensitization, reflecting their anxiety and fear after seeing violent content. Specifically, only 11.2% of the sample had a negative perception of such material, which demonstrates that it causes psychological arousal. The reason for such results could be the difference between real and fictitious content. Indeed, scholars have mentioned that desensitization research has demonstrated low external validity when measuring the impact of real-life violence with fictitious content (Mrug et al., 2016). Thus, the results of the study reveal the influence of graphic content on the audience and contradict the literature on desensitization from exposure to violence.

Table 4.8 Such Content Triggers Feelings of Sadness or Grief

Response	**Frequency**	**Percent (%)**
Strongly Agree	134	42.8%
Agree	110	35.1%
Neutral	38	12.1%

Disagree	21	6.7%
Strongly Disagree	10	3.2%
Total	313	100.0%

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Analysis: Table 4.8 below contains the distribution of the respondents' views on whether the graphic content of child victimisation on X evokes feelings of sadness or grief. The majority of the 313 surveyed undergraduates agree or strongly agree with the statement, at 77.9%. This is the highest recorded degree of agreement with a psychological effect item in this study. Furthermore, 12.1% of the respondents selected the neutral option, while 6.7% disagreed and 3.2% strongly disagreed. As such, the total percentage of respondents who had negative or neutral sentiments towards the effect statement comprises only 9.9%.

The data from Table 4.8 above indicate that the perception of the graphic content of child victimisation on the social media platform tends to evoke the feeling of sadness or grief among the surveyed population. The high degree of agreement with the statement demonstrates that the sentiment is strongly prevalent and widespread in the sample population. Moreover, the relatively low level of disagreement indicates that it was not offset by less negative sentiments to any significant extent.

The psychological effect described by the item aligns with some of the findings reported by other researchers. Indeed, several studies have demonstrated that the use of social media to view distressing content tends to cause adverse psychological effects such as sadness, grief, and vicarious trauma (Goodwin et al., 2013; Stewart, 2022). In fact, the data in Table 4.8 above corroborate these findings, showing that graphic content featuring child victimisation tends to have rather strong negative psychological effects. These include sadness and grief, the levels of which tend to be much higher than those of other emotions.

However, the degree of agreement with the effect statement is not aligned with the desensitization hypothesis. According to this theory, regular exposure to violent media content leads to reduced emotional responsiveness to similar stimuli (Krahe et al., 2011; Mrug et al., 2016). In particular, levels of sadness, fear, and other negative emotions decrease significantly. However, according to Table 4.8 above, the opposite trend occurs when the examined social media content is viewed. Specifically, the level of agreement with the given effect statement is rather high, as is the level of overall negative sentiments towards it. As such, they tend to confirm the reverse of the desensitization hypothesis. Presumably, this phenomenon can occur due to the fact that the materials are non-fictional, whereas the majority of studies supporting desensitization employed fictional movies as stimuli.

Ultimately, Table 4.8 above illustrates the considerable negative psychological impact that the graphic depictions of child victimisation depicted on the X social media platform tend to produce on the surveyed undergraduate students. Specifically, its strong negative effect on their levels of sadness and grief is especially notable. Compared to other types of violent content, child victimisation tends to produce more intense adverse psychological effects, the levels of which are much higher than those of negative emotions. Ultimately, the data in Table 4.8 show that, out of several possible psychological effects, the graphic content of child victimisation on social media tends to strongly affect the respondents' sentiments of sadness and grief.

Table 4.9 Respondents Have Become Desensitized to Such Content Over Time

Response	Frequency	Percent (%)
Strongly Agree	98	31.3%
Agree	121	38.7%
Neutral	52	16.6%
Disagree	28	8.9%
Strongly Disagree	14	4.5%
Total	313	100.0%

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Analysis: Table 4.9 below represents the respondents' perception of being desensitized to graphic content of violence against children on X. From the pool of 313 undergraduate students, 98 respondents strongly agreed and 121 agreed, making the total agreement percentage equal to 70.0%. On the other hand, 52 or 16.6% remained neutral, while 28 or 8.9% disagreed and 14 or 4.5% strongly disagreed, thus comprising 13.4%.

Based on the obtained results, it can be concluded that the majority of the sampled population has become desensitized to the prevalence of graphic content of violence against children on the social media platform X over time. This conclusion is based on the significant proportion of respondents who either strongly agree or agree when asked about the desensitization to such content. Moreover, the percentage of disagreement was comparatively low, suggesting that the lack of emotional response to the violence viewed on the social media platform is a common occurrence among the sampled population. This outcome can be explained by the desensitization theory, which states that regular viewing of graphic content results in a decreased level of physiological and emotional responses to violence (Mrug et al., 2016; Krahe et al., 2011). Indeed, the obtained results confirm this theory, as the majority of respondents reported becoming desensitized to the prevalence of such content.

However, the current result might appear conflicting at first glance with the results presented in the previous tables. Although the majority of respondents claimed to be desensitized to graphic content of child violence, they also strongly agreed that they experienced anxiety, fear, sadness, and grief upon seeing such content. Therefore, it can be suggested that the respondents are emotionally sensitive to the violence depicted on X but only on a short-term basis. In other words, the repeated exposure to graphic content may trigger acute emotional responses on an individual basis, while overall emotional arousal levels remain relatively stable.

Table 4.10 Respondents Experience Compassion Fatigue from Repeated Exposure

Response	Frequency	Percent (%)
Strongly Agree	88	28.1%

Agree	112	35.8%
Neutral	64	20.4%
Disagree	32	10.2%
Strongly Disagree	17	5.4%
Total	313	100.0%

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Analysis: Table 4.10 below contains the distribution of responses to the item developed to assess whether exposure to graphic content containing violence against children on X leads to compassion fatigue. Overall, eight out of 313 respondents strongly agreed and 112 agreed with the statement, amounting to 63.9% of all answers. Meanwhile, 64 respondents were neutral about their attitude (20.4%), and 32 disagreed with it while 17 strongly disagreed with it, summing up to 15.6%.

These results suggest that the majority of respondents followed by a considerable minority experienced compassion fatigue. As previously found, exposure to content with violence against children led to adverse mental outcomes in undergraduates. However, as suggested by the large proportion of neutral responses, this response pattern was less evident than the adverse emotions of anxiety and sadness reflected in Tables 4.7 and 4.8 above.

The evidence aligns with studies on vicarious trauma, posttraumatic stress, and secondary traumatization which suggest that repeated exposure to graphic content leads to viewers' compassion fatigue, loss of empathy, and emotional desensitization (Goodwin et al., 2013; Stewart, 2022). In particular, responding strongly to this item was associated with adverse mental health outcomes linked to watching social media content with violence against children. By extension, agreeing to this statement was more common than disagreeing (63.9% vs. 15.6%).

Meanwhile, the prevalence of neutral attitudes and the lower agreement level relative to questions on anxiety and sadness (cf. Table 4.8) partially contradict findings on rapid desensitization to graphic content (Krahe et al., 2011). Specifically, while vicarious traumatization may involve a loss of empathy over days or weeks following an initial traumatic event, it often overlaps with short-term emotions such as horror and fear.

Table 4.11 Such Content Disrupts Respondents' Sleep or Daily Mood

Response	**Frequency**	**Percent (%)**
Strongly Agree	70	22.4%
Agree	95	30.4%
Neutral	78	24.9%
Disagree	45	14.4%

Strongly Disagree	25	8.0%
Total	313	100.0%

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Analysis: The results presented in table 4.11 indicate that 52.8% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that exposure to graphic content involving violence against children on X affects their sleep or mood on a day-to-day basis. Specifically, there were 70 respondents who strongly agreed (22.4%) and 95 respondents who agreed (30.4%). On the other hand, there were 78 respondents who were neutral (24.9%) and 45 respondents who disagreed (14.4%), and 25 respondents strongly disagreed (8.0%), for a total of 22.4%.

This measurement recorded the lowest percentage of agreement among the items developed to assess the psychological impact of the X platform on the participants. It was also the sole item in section B whose mean score was below the 3.50 agreement threshold. The analysis revealed that while exposure to graphic content resulted in adverse psychological consequences for the respondents in terms of immediate emotions, such as fear, sadness, and grief, its association with disrupted sleep or mood was lower but nonetheless considerable. This is evidenced by the relatively high percentage of respondents who were neutral about the consequences of viewing such content on X.

The results of the current study are consistent with prior research that found repeated exposure to graphic and distressing social media content to be strongly associated with sleep deprivation, psychological stress, and disruptions to everyday behavior (Goodwin et al., 2013; Stewart, 2022).

Studies conducted into the phenomenon of vicarious trauma also found that viewing upsetting content involving violence against children disrupted the sleep patterns and day-to-day activities of frequent social media users (Stewart, 2022). Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that the effect of viewing similar content on X would follow the same pattern.

Section C: Influence of Repeated Exposure on Audience Risk Perception

Table 4.12 Respondents Believe Children in Their Community Are at Higher Risk of Violence

Response	**Frequency**	**Percent (%)**
Strongly Agree	128	40.9%
Agree	120	38.3%
Neutral	38	12.1%
Disagree	18	5.8%
Strongly Disagree	9	2.9%
Total	313	100.0%

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Analysis: Table 4.12 reveals that 79.2% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that, having seen graphic content of violence against children on X, they now felt that children

in their community were at a higher risk of violence. Indeed, 128 respondents (40.9%) strongly agreed, while 120 (38.3%) agreed. Furthermore, 38 respondents (12.1%) were neutral, 18 (5.8%) disagreed, and 9 (2.9%) strongly disagreed, representing 8.7% of all respondents. The level of agreement was among the highest across the items related to the perceived impact of the violent content and suggests that the respondents had significantly increased concerns about their communities being at risk of violence. First and foremost, the data demonstrate that exposure to violent content on social media had a significant impact on respondents' perceptions of the risks in their local communities. In other words, respondents' fears were generalized to their immediate surroundings, where they interact with other children daily. Furthermore, the data show that the respondents' concerns were almost universal, as very few respondents indicated any degree of disagreement with the item.

The data can be related to the literature on the effects of graphic content in social media on people's perceptions of the risks in their communities. Recent studies have revealed that exposure to violence and other traumatic content increases people's sense of vulnerability to the negative outcomes of the same (Goodwin et al., 2013; Stewart, 2022). Indeed, the data gathered for this study reveal that respondents were unanimous to a significant extent in their belief that the violent content had increased their concerns about the safety of children in their community. The literature suggests that such an outcome might be explained by the fact that exposure to such content increases individuals' sense of vulnerability to becoming a victim of a crime (Goodwin et al., 2013).

However, the data contradict some of the literature's claims regarding desensitization to graphic content. In particular, several studies have demonstrated that exposure to violent content decreases individuals' sensitivity to violence, resulting in a lower risk of being negatively affected by it (Krahe et al., 2011; Mrug et al., 2016). As such, one would expect the respondents to be desensitized to the effects of violent content, such as a reduced sense of vulnerability to being negatively affected by it. However, the data demonstrate that, instead of reducing the respondents' concerns, exposure to graphic content increased their sense of vulnerability to their children being victims of a crime.

Table 4.13 Respondents Have Become More Protective or Vigilant of Children in Their Lives

Response	**Frequency**	**Percent (%)**
Strongly Agree	150	47.9%
Agree	108	34.5%
Neutral	32	10.2%
Disagree	15	4.8%
Strongly Disagree	8	2.6%
Total	313	100.0%

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Analysis: Table 4.13 indicates that 82.4% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that, as a result of seeing graphic content depicting violence against children on X, they have

become more protective or vigilant of children in their lives. Out of the 315 respondents, 150 (47.9%) strongly agreed and 108 (34.5%) agreed. Furthermore, 32 respondents (10.2%) were neutral, whereas 15 (4.8%) disagreed and 8 (2.6%) strongly disagreed, amounting to 7.4% of disagreeing respondents.

This agreement rate ranks among the highest in the study, signifying a profound level of behavioral change. In this case, exposure to graphic content resulted in increased protectiveness and vigilance for the majority of participants. Even more so, the considerable level of agreement suggests that such behavioral change was overwhelming for respondents. The findings were consistent with the reviewed literature to a significant extent. Specifically, exposure to graphic depictions of child victimization on social media tends to lead to more protective attitudes and behaviors towards children. Research on vicarious trauma and the impact of media on fear indicates that individuals may become more careful around children after frequently encountering child victimization (Goodwin et al., 2013; Stewart, 2022).

In turn, the agreement with the item "after seeing graphic content depicting violence against children on X, I have become more protective or vigilant of children in my life" does not support desensitization hypotheses. Indeed, several studies suggest that graphic violence fosters some degree of tolerance or reduces emotional responsiveness to violence in general (Krahe et al., 2011; Mrug et al., 2016). However, as the results demonstrate, for the majority of respondents, the motivation to be more cautious around children outweighed potential desensitization effects. The tendency is particularly evident when considering the neutral, disagreeing, and strongly disagreeing respondents, who comprised 20.6% of participants. The findings suggest that the fear of actual child victimization is more motivating than desensitization to fictitious violence. In turn, the analysis indicates that experiences of real-world victimization may have longer-lasting motivational effects than exposure to fictitious violence.

Table 4.14 Respondents Believe the World Is More Dangerous for Children Than Statistics Suggest

Response	Frequency	Percent (%)
Strongly Agree	112	35.8%
Agree	114	36.4%
Neutral	52	16.6%
Disagree	24	7.7%
Strongly Disagree	11	3.5%
Total	313	100.0%

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Analysis: Table 4.14 shows that 72.2% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that upon seeing graphic content about violence against children on X, they believe the world to be far more dangerous for children than the statistics show. Out of the 311 interviewed undergraduates, 112

(35.8%) strongly agreed, and 114 (36.4%) agreed. 52 respondents (16.6%) were neutral, while 24 (7.7%) disagreed, and 11 (3.5%) strongly disagreed, amounting to 11.2% of disagrees.

This is a very substantial agreement among the sampled population that violent content on social media contributes to their perception of reality being far more dangerous for children than it actually is. It suggests that a considerable chunk of the audience that actively engages with social media is in a constant state of worry about their kids getting exposed to something terrible. Over 70% of the interviewed population hold this view, which is a very significant figure. It highlights the importance of the discussed phenomenon in modern society and the impact that the visual content on social media may have on the audience.

The survey results align with cultivation theory and Mean World Syndrome (Gerbner, 1998; Gerbner et al., 2002) because they show that people that spend time watching violent content on social media tend to believe that the world is far more dangerous than it actually is. In this particular case, respondents noticed that seeing violent content about children being victimized makes them worry about their kids being victimized as well. This may suggest that the real-life content on social media cultivates the belief in the population that child victims are common. Thus, the results further prove the importance of such content to social reality and show that it may resonate with people long after they see it. Contrary to the cultivation hypothesis of exposure to media resulting in viewers becoming desensitized to violence, the results show that the authentic content on social media often makes the audience more afraid rather than indifferent. This evidence may be helpful in studying the effect that the discussed type of content has on the population's perception of the world and children's safety.

Table 4.15 Respondents Trust Institutions Less to Protect Children After Such Exposure

Response	**Frequency**	**Percent (%)**
Strongly Agree	96	30.7%
Agree	118	37.7%
Neutral	58	18.5%
Disagree	28	8.9%
Strongly Disagree	13	4.2%
Response	**Frequency**	**Percent (%)**
Total	313	100.0%

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Analysis: Table 4.15 presents the results supporting the study's first research question. The results indicate that 68.4% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that seeing graphic content involving violence against children on X decreased their trust and confidence in the government and authorities to protect children. Specifically, 96 participants (30.7%) strongly agreed, while 118 respondents (37.7%) agreed. On the other hand, 58 participants (18.5%) were neutral, and 28 respondents (8.9%) disagreed and 13 participants strongly disagreed (4.2%), representing 13.1% of the sample.

The results can be considered moderately positive for the study's initial question. The results suggest that the exposure to graphic content strongly affects the participants' perceptions of the authorities' ability to ensure children's safety. The results are consistent with previous studies that indicate the impact of media content on individuals' attitudes towards social institutions (Norris, 2000; Putnam, 2000). The "mean world" hypothesis explains the tendency of the public to distrust authorities after consuming violent content (Gerbner et al., 2002). Similarly, vicarious traumatization theory suggests that exposure to trauma can make individuals adopt similar perspectives and attitudes (Goodwin et al., 2013). Therefore, the results indicate that the authorities' inability to prevent violence against children decreases the public's trust and confidence in them.

Table 4.16 Respondents' Perceived Commonness of Child Abuse Has Increased Due to X Content

Response	**Frequency**	**Percent (%)**
Strongly Agree	122	39.0%
Response	**Frequency**	**Percent (%)**
Agree	116	37.1%
Neutral	45	14.4%
Disagree	20	6.4%
Strongly Disagree	10	3.2%
Total	313	100.0%

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Analysis: Table 4.16 below shows that 76.1% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that the perception of commonness of child abuse had risen due to the X's graphic content. 122 (39.0%) participants strongly agreed, and 116 (37.1%) agreed. 45 (14.4%) were indifferent, and 20 (6.4%) disagreed, while 10 (3.2%) strongly disagreed, amounting to only 9.6% in the negative category.

Such agreement is one of the highest across the items, pointing to the substantial degree to which graphic content may affect students' estimations of social problems. The fact that the number of respondents who strongly agreed was almost equal to those who merely agreed highlights the degree to which an issue's frequency may be exacerbated through social media. Thus, over threequarters of students noted that the likelihood of child abuse was perceived higher due to the X's graphic content, indicating the volume of media's impact on such content.

The data align with the availability heuristic (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973), which highlights that people often perceive a situation as more likely if they can easily recall similar instances from memory. The cases of child abuse depicted via social media often resonate with individuals due to their horrific nature and thus are easy to process and remember. Therefore, applying such a mental shortcut leads to the overestimation of the prevalence of child abuse since a person would think that the number of such incidents is much higher than it actually is. The results also challenge the desensitization hypothesis, which is implied by the

data on rising concerns. The cultivation theory is further supported by the data as the frequency of child abuse in the media significantly affects the audience's perception of the matter, which may ultimately shape their attitude toward the issue based on personal beliefs.

Section D: Audience Attitudes Towards the Circulation of Graphic Content Depicting Violence Against Children

Table 4.17 X Should Restrict Graphic Content Depicting Violence Against Children

Response	Frequency	Percent (%)
Strongly Agree	140	44.7%
Agree	109	34.8%
Neutral	35	11.2%
Disagree	18	5.8%
Strongly Disagree	11	3.5%
Total	313	100.0%

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Analysis: Table 4.17 presents the analysis of the gathered data. As can be seen from the findings, 79.5% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that X should moderate the circulation of graphic content on violence against children. Of the 140 participants who strongly agreed and 109 who agreed with this idea, 9.3% had no opinion, did not like the idea at all or strongly disliked it.

The strongest agreement with this statement reflects a high level of recognition of the responsibility of the platform to control and regulate such information. Despite the respondents' interest in X, its ability to maintain and increase this indicator in the future is questionable. The data obtained support a number of previous studies on the attitude of the audience towards social media moderation after being exposed to harmful content (Gillespie, 2018; Suzor, 2019). At the same time, they demonstrate that the experience of viewing harmful information strengthens the tendency for users to take responsibility for content control. This is especially evident from the high percentage of those who chose the strongest form of agreement (44.7%). Thus, the results and discussion contribute to the understanding of what steps are necessary to protect users from similar information in the future.

Table 4.18 Sharing Such Content Raises Awareness and Should Continue

Response	Frequency	Percent (%)
Strongly Agree	76	24.3%
Agree	98	31.3%
Neutral	62	19.8%
Disagree	48	15.3%

Strongly Disagree	29	9.3%
Total	313	100.0%

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Analysis: Table 4.18 indicates that 55.6% of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that sharing graphic content of violence against children on Twitter increases public awareness. In particular, 76 respondents indicated their strong agreement (24.3%), while 98 indicated their agreement (31.3%). At the same time, 24.6% held neutral positions, with 62 participants being indifferent (19.8%) and 48 expressing their disagreement (15.3%). Disagreement was also strong with 29 respondents (9.3%) indicating their strong disagreement.

Unlike the preceding statements where almost all participants demonstrated strong agreement, this item had become the most divisive one. It assumes that, while almost half of the surveyed undergraduates believe that violence against children should be shared on social media to increase awareness, almost the same fraction expressed their neutrality or disagreement. In other words, while some participants still believe that increased awareness could be achieved by sharing graphic content, many are starting to question the ethical implications of such sharing.

Indeed, the identified tendency reflects the debate on the role of graphic content in advocacy (Gregory, 2010; Hoskins & O'Loughlin, 2010). On the one hand, sharing violent content can help in increasing awareness of a particular social problem, thus facilitating advocacy efforts. On the other hand, there is a need to recognize the limits of such sharing in favor of protecting the rights of victims and avoiding re-victimization. The ethics of sharing graphic content of violence against children in social media appears to be a complex issue for the surveyed population. Thus, while most participants still believe that such sharing helps in raising awareness, they also start to question its usefulness from the perspective of victim advocacy. This tendency might have significant implications for the strategies chosen by advocates to share information.

Table 4.19 Respondents Have Reported or Flagged Such Content When Encountered

Response	**Frequency**	**Percent (%)**
Strongly Agree	54	17.3%
Agree	72	23.0%
Neutral	60	19.2%
Disagree	72	23.0%
Strongly Disagree	55	17.6%
Total	313	100.0%

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Analysis: Table 4.19 shows that only 40.3% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they would actively report or flag any graphic content involving violence against children on X when encountered. Of those, 54 respondents (17.3%) strongly agreed, while 72 (23.0%)

agreed. The data can be seen as almost split, with 60 respondents (19.2%) being neutral and 72 (23.0%) disagreeing and 55 (17.6%) strongly disagreeing, totaling 40.6%.

This low level of willingness to report graphic content indicates that the intentions of users are not aligned with their behavior, despite a majority supporting the restriction of content and increased protection in general. The fact that almost an equal number of respondents disagreed or agreed and another considerable portion of the sample was neutral implies that they may not have the motivation or time to report such content, do not believe that their reports will have a visible effect, or are desensitized to the issue.

The tendency has been noted in social psychology in relation to bystander behavior and is known as the attitude-behavior gap (Darley & Latané, 1968; Jenkins et al., 2021). This study's results are in line with similar phenomena in that the mere awareness of the problem and its effects on society is not enough; people need to be motivated to take action. In this case, however, the motivation seems to be lacking, which may be explained by unwillingness, inaction due to complexity of the reporting process, or fear of encountering the content again. Either way, the statistics demonstrate an important issue, as the attitude of social media users toward the problem of violence against children is clearly not congruent with their behavior. This information may be used to improve the accessibility of reporting on social media platforms and encourage users to participate in moderation and protection of the online space by addressing the attitude-behavior gap.

Table 4.20 Sharers of Such Content Should Face Consequences for Circulating Footage Without Consent

Response	Frequency	Percent (%)
Strongly Agree	128	40.9%
Agree	112	35.8%
Neutral	42	13.4%
Disagree	21	6.7%
Strongly Disagree	10	3.2%
Total	313	100.0%

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Analysis: Table 4.20 demonstrates that 76.7% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that people who shared graphic videos of child victimization without consent should be held accountable. Specifically, 128 participants (40.9%) strongly agreed, and 112 respondents (35.8%) simply agreed. On the contrary, 42 respondents (13.4%) remained neutral, while 21 (6.7%) disagreed, and 10 participants (3.2%) strongly disagreed, thus comprising only 9.9% of all respondents.

Such an overwhelming support for holding individuals accountable demonstrates that the public opinion on the matter leans towards demanding not only platform moderation but personal responsibility from those who spread graphic media. Moreover, the significant proportion of respondents who strongly agreed (40.9%) suggests that the public views the intentional sharing of distressing videos of child victimization as morally wrong and deserving

of punishment. Indeed, the public sentiment analysis conducted in accordance with the findings of this study supports the claims made in literature on the prevalence of ethical concerns and moral responsibility in social media moderation (Waldman, 2021; Citron & Franks, 2022). In particular, research conducted on the impact of non-consensual sharing of intimate media depicts a similar public sentiment towards the distribution of intimate videos of others without consent, especially children (Waldman, 2021).

Thus, this statistic can be utilized to improve the existing policies regarding the ethical distribution of media on social media platforms while also supporting the need for stricter content moderation practices. Indeed, the findings of this study demonstrate a complex public opinion towards the sharing of graphic videos of child victimization, which appears to be split between those demanding stronger legal policies and those calling for awareness campaigns, which indicates a general agreement on the need for stronger regulations concerning such content. Consequently, this statistic may become useful in shaping the discourse around stricter legislative acts against the distribution of intimate media without consent and the improvement of social media moderation practices, specifically concerning accounts on X..

Table 4.21 Respondents Actively Avoid or Scroll Past Such Content When Anticipated

Response	**Frequency**	**Percent (%)**
Strongly Agree	92	29.4%
Agree	104	33.2%
Neutral	58	18.5%
Disagree	38	12.1%
Strongly Disagree	21	6.7%
Total	313	100.0%

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Analysis: Table 4.21 below presents the analyzed data, demonstrating that 62.6% of the respondents agree or strongly agree that, when expecting to encounter graphic content depicting violence toward children on X, they actively avoid or scroll through the explicit material. From the sample of 315 participants, 92 respondents strongly agree, while 104 individuals agree. In addition, 58 participants remain neutral, whereas 38 disagree and 21 strongly disagree with this statement, constituting 18.8% of the sample.

The strong agreement with the provided statement suggests that a considerable proportion of the target population employ active strategies to avoid exposing themselves to graphic violence toward children on social media platforms when anticipating such content. Such measures include intentionally skipping the corresponding posts or sections of texts. This inclination implies that users acknowledge the potential negative impact resulting from viewing violent content and recognize their susceptibility to it. Nonetheless, the observed level of agreement could be deemed moderate, given the comparatively high percentage of disagreement with the statement (18.8%).

The identified outcomes corroborate the conclusions from previous research, which revealed the prevalence of avoidance mechanisms utilized by individuals to mitigate distress

stemming from encountering adverse information or unpleasant content on the internet (Gross, 2001; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). In particular, the tendency to exercise caution when engaging with potentially harmful content aligns with the principles of vicarious traumatization and mechanisms of action employed to regulate exposure to detrimental information and experiences. Thus, the demonstrated patterns provide an additional illustration of users developing defensive strategies to protect themselves from the adverse effect of viewing graphic violence toward children. Moreover, the tendency supports the previously established trend of protective conduct concerning children, including the recognition of risks and attempts to limit exposure to threats to children's wellbeing. Nevertheless, the inclination to avoid such content cannot always be entirely effective, especially in the context of social media, where individuals interact with many sources without exercising complete control over their content. The tendency might partially account for the impact of social media on users' wellbeing, particularly their mental health, and could inform further considerations pertaining to the enhancement of protective measures.

V. Conclusion

These research results provide sufficient justification for this paper's theoretical framework. The study reveals that repeated exposure to violent and graphic material on X affecting children has psychological effects on Nigerian undergraduate students, ranging from desensitisation to altering risk perception and attitudes towards such content. This paper will discuss how the results of this study align with the theories used for analysis, which include the Social Cognitive Theory and Mean World Syndrome.

A majority, 70.0%, of the respondents indicated that they felt desensitised upon viewing the material presented to them, while 76.0% experienced anxiety, and 77.9% felt sad or mournful. As predicted by the Social Cognitive Theory of Learning, the data indicates that repeated exposure to violence causes gradual desensitisation rather than eliminating emotional responses altogether. Meanwhile, the most interesting result of the study is that emotional desensitisation was independent of perceived risk. As mentioned in Section B of Chapter Four, respondents experienced significant desensitisation, although no correlation was observed between the reduced negative affective responses and decreased levels of perceived risk. In other words, the respondents felt less emotionally affected by the horrific content but were no less aware of the threat that such content posed to themselves and society. If anything, their levels of perceived risk had increased, which is evident in the high scores on the 'personal responsibility' subscale. The dissociation between desensitisation and heightened awareness illustrates the influence of constant exposure to violence on Nigerian undergraduates.

This study's results offer substantial confirmation for the claims of the Mean World Syndrome. As mentioned in Section B of Chapter Four, 72.2% of respondents believed that the world was more dangerous for children than suggested by official statistics, and 82.4% felt more responsible for protecting children. The majority of the respondents had developed protective behaviours that stemmed from their fears. Moreover, 68.4% of respondents reported lower levels of trust in institutions' ability to safeguard children, implying that their views on society and personal responsibility were being shaped by the violent content they frequently encountered online. The mean world perspective influenced their attitudes and behaviours, as illustrated by their belief in the prevalence of violence and their sense of responsibility. This result was expected, given the numerous reported cases of child abuse and violence circulated on X regarding Nigeria.

It is noteworthy that this study's findings do not indicate that the studied audience perceived graphic content depicting violence against children as beneficial to society. Despite 79.5% of respondents supporting restrictions on such content and 76.7% believing that those who shared it should be held accountable, only 40.3% of respondents had reported similar content when personally encountering it. Thus, this study identified a gap between beliefs and behaviours, which is the second significant contribution of this paper.

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