

The Psychology of Media Influence: Shaping Thoughts, Behaviour, and Society

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ABSTRACT

Media has evolved from a passive vehicle of information to an active agent shaping human thought, behavior, and social norms. From traditional print and broadcast media to today's highly interactive digital and social platforms, media's psychological impact has grown profoundly, influencing perception, emotion, decision-making, and collective identity. This paper explores the complex relationship between media and the human mind through the lens of media psychology, with particular attention to cognitive processing, emotional responses, behavioural outcomes, and societal implications.

Drawing from foundational theories such as Cultivation Theory, Agenda-Setting Theory, and the Social Cognitive Theory of mass communication, the study investigates how repeated media exposure molds public opinion, reinforces stereotypes, and influences attitudes. The paper also discusses the persuasive mechanisms embedded in media content—framing, priming, narrative transportation, and emotional contagion—and how they contribute to behavioral shifts in areas such as consumerism, political participation, aggression, and prosocial behavior.

Particular emphasis is placed on the role of social media in shaping digital identities, echo chambers, and instant gratification behaviors among younger audiences. Case studies on media-induced panic (e.g., during the COVID-19 pandemic), body image disorders, and political polarization further illustrate the far-reaching psychological and social consequences of uncritical media consumption.

The paper concludes with a critical discussion on the ethical responsibilities of media creators, the need for media literacy education, and the importance of interdisciplinary approaches to mitigate media's negative psychological impacts. Through this exploration, the study underscores the power of media not only to inform but to transform individual consciousness and societal values.

Keywords: Media Psychology; Cognitive Influence; Behavioural Conditioning; Social Media Impact; Media Literacy

1. Introduction

The modern era is witnessing an unprecedented transformation in the way individuals interact with media. No longer confined to passive consumption, audiences today are immersed in a constant stream of visual, textual, and interactive content that not only informs but subtly shapes their perceptions, emotions, and behaviors. The psychology of media influence has thus become an essential area of scholarly inquiry, addressing how media environments affect human cognition and contribute to broader social and cultural change.

From the early days of radio and television to the omnipresence of smartphones and social media, the media landscape has continually evolved—bringing with it powerful tools of persuasion, narrative framing, and emotional stimulation. This shift has generated profound implications for individuals and society, ranging from changes in political ideology and consumer habits to the normalization of violence and the shaping of body image standards. In particular, the psychological mechanisms through which media content is internalized—such as repetition, emotional resonance, and social reinforcement—play a pivotal role in guiding thought processes and behavioral tendencies.

The study of media psychology bridges several academic disciplines, including communication studies, cognitive psychology, sociology, and behavioral science. Scholars have long debated the extent and nature of media's influence, from the “hypodermic needle” model of direct, powerful effects to more nuanced models that account for selective perception and individual differences. Contemporary research has further expanded this discussion by investigating how algorithm-driven content curation, digital echo chambers, and virality influence user behavior on a mass scale.

In this context, the present study aims to critically examine how media—especially digital and social media—affects psychological processes and social behaviors. It seeks to answer crucial questions: How does repeated media exposure shape attitudes and beliefs? In what ways does media influence behavior, both at the individual and collective level? What are the consequences of media-driven emotional arousal, and how do these shape decision-making and interpersonal relationships? Moreover, how can media literacy and ethical content

creation counterbalance the adverse psychological effects of manipulative or misleading media?

By exploring these questions, the paper aspires to contribute to the growing body of interdisciplinary literature on media influence, and to offer recommendations for media consumers, educators, policymakers, and content creators. Understanding the psychological underpinnings of media influence is not only an academic exercise but also a societal necessity in an age where media is inextricably linked to our everyday lives, our identities, and our values.

2. Theoretical Framework

Understanding the psychological influence of media requires grounding in established communication and behavioural theories. These theoretical frameworks provide a lens through which the complex interplay between media content, audience interpretation, and behavioural outcomes can be critically examined. This section explores key models from media studies and psychology that explain how and why media impacts thought, emotion, and societal conduct.

2.1 Cultivation Theory (George Gerbner)

Cultivation Theory posits that long-term exposure to media content, particularly television, subtly shapes viewers' perceptions of social reality. Developed by George Gerbner in the 1970s, the theory suggests that media cultivates attitudes and beliefs about the world that often reflect the most recurrent messages portrayed in media narratives. For example, heavy viewers of crime dramas may develop an exaggerated fear of crime—commonly referred to as the “mean world syndrome.” In the digital era, this theory extends to social media and 24/7 news cycles, where algorithmic repetition can cultivate anxiety, misinformation, or social distrust.

2.2 Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs and Shaw)

Agenda-Setting Theory, introduced by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, suggests that while media may not always tell people what to think, it significantly influences what they think about. By prioritizing certain issues, the media shapes public discourse and policy debates. In psychological terms, agenda-setting impacts cognitive salience—the prominence

of certain ideas in the audience's mind. Especially on platforms like Twitter or news portals, headlines and trending stories guide attention, thereby framing public concerns and behavioral responses.

2.3 Social Cognitive Theory (Albert Bandura)

Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory emphasizes the role of observational learning in shaping human behavior. Media serves as a powerful model from which individuals, especially youth, learn norms, values, and actions. Viewers may imitate behaviors they see modeled in media content, especially when such behaviors are rewarded or glamorized. For instance, portrayals of aggression, substance use, or consumerism in films and music videos can shape audience behaviors and attitudes, a phenomenon Bandura describes as vicarious reinforcement.

2.4 Framing and Priming

While closely related to agenda-setting, Framing Theory delves deeper into how media not only tells audiences what to think about but also how to think about it. Media frames—specific ways of presenting information—can influence interpretations and emotional responses. For instance, describing a protest as a “riot” versus a “peaceful demonstration” significantly alters audience perception. Priming, on the other hand, refers to the psychological process where exposure to certain stimuli influences subsequent responses. In media, recurring negative coverage about specific groups may prime viewers to hold stereotypical or prejudiced attitudes.

2.5 Uses and Gratifications Theory

Unlike the passive audience assumptions of earlier models, Uses and Gratifications Theory suggests that individuals actively choose media to satisfy specific psychological needs—such as information-seeking, emotional release, social interaction, or identity formation. This theory helps explain why different individuals interpret and react to the same content in diverse ways. It is particularly relevant in the age of personalized digital media, where users exercise considerable control over content selection and engagement.

2.6 Emotional Contagion and Narrative Transportation

Recent developments in media psychology focus on emotional contagion—the phenomenon where emotional states can be transferred from media content to viewers. This is evident in viral videos, dramatic news coverage, and emotionally charged films that trigger anger, fear, joy, or empathy. Closely related is narrative transportation, wherein audiences become mentally immersed in a story, reducing counter-arguing and increasing identification with characters. Both mechanisms powerfully shape values, beliefs, and even behavioural intentions.

These theories collectively provide a robust conceptual foundation for analysing how media functions as a psychological agent. They also offer critical insights into the mechanics behind influence—whether through subtle conditioning, emotional engagement, cognitive framing, or learned behaviors.

3. Cognitive and Emotional Effects of Media

Media has a profound impact on how individuals perceive, process, and emotionally respond to the world around them. The human mind, though highly adaptive, is susceptible to influence through repeated exposure, emotional triggers, and symbolic representations embedded within media content. This section explores how media affects cognitive functions such as attention, memory, perception, and emotional processing, with particular emphasis on the digital and social media landscape.

3.1 Attention and Cognitive Overload

Digital media environments—especially social media platforms—are designed to capture and fragment attention. With constant notifications, autoplay videos, and algorithmically personalized feeds, users are bombarded with information stimuli, leading to cognitive overload. Research indicates that excessive multitasking with media reduces sustained attention and working memory performance, particularly among younger audiences. The average attention span has reportedly decreased in the digital era, challenging both educators and media professionals in crafting content that retains focus.

3.2 Memory and Misinformation

Media content significantly influences memory formation and recall. Repeated exposure to the same narrative can create false memories or illusory truths—where familiarity is mistaken for accuracy. This is particularly concerning in the context of fake news and misinformation, where repeated sharing of distorted facts reinforces belief. Moreover, emotional content tends to be more memorable, especially when it provokes fear, outrage, or sadness—commonly seen in sensational news headlines and crisis reporting.

3.3 Perception and Reality Construction

Media plays a central role in shaping social and cultural perceptions of reality. From news reports to entertainment shows, media constructs narratives that influence how audiences interpret events, people, and places. Studies show that media portrayals can reinforce stereotypes and contribute to implicit bias, particularly concerning race, gender, and class. When media representations lack diversity or misrepresent minority groups, they distort public understanding and perpetuate social prejudices.

3.4 Emotional Regulation and Mood Effects

Media consumption also affects emotional regulation—the process by which individuals manage and respond to emotional experiences. While some forms of media, such as music or comedy, serve as tools for emotional relief and positive arousal, others—such as violent video games or distressing news—may increase emotional dysregulation, including anxiety, anger, or sadness. The use of social media, especially among adolescents, has been linked to increased levels of depression and loneliness due to social comparison and fear of missing out (FOMO).

3.5 Identity Formation and Self-Perception

Media plays a formative role in identity construction, especially during adolescence. Television characters, influencers, and celebrities act as models for behavior, appearance, and values. Social media platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok have amplified this effect, encouraging users to curate idealized versions of themselves. This can lead to body image issues, low self-esteem, and social anxiety, particularly when users measure their worth through likes, comments, or followers.

3.6 Fear, Empathy, and Desensitization

Media can evoke powerful emotional reactions. Exposure to disaster coverage, war footage, or stories of human suffering may trigger empathy and promote prosocial behavior. However, repeated exposure to violent or traumatic content can also lead to emotional desensitization, where individuals become less responsive to suffering. This duality of emotional arousal—heightening concern in some cases while numbing reaction in others—underscores the importance of content framing and ethical reporting. In sum, media consumption is not a neutral act. It actively engages cognitive and emotional processes, shaping how individuals interpret the world and react to it. Understanding these psychological effects is essential for creating responsible media content and for educating audiences to navigate media critically and reflectively.

4. Behavioural Influence and Social Conditioning

Media does more than influence thoughts and emotions—it shapes human behavior, both at the individual and collective levels. Through repeated exposure, symbolic modeling, and subtle persuasion, media conditions social norms, values, and actions. This section examines the psychological mechanisms by which media influences behavior, including imitation, reinforcement, conformity, and the normalization of certain behaviors across different media platforms.

4.1 Observational Learning and Imitation

Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory posits that individuals learn behaviors by observing others, particularly when those behaviors are rewarded or glorified. Media content serves as a rich source of behavioral models—celebrities, fictional characters, influencers, and peers. Children and adolescents are particularly susceptible to such observational learning, often mimicking language, fashion, or attitudes seen in movies, music videos, and social media content. Positive behaviors—such as helping others or standing up for justice—can be promoted through prosocial modeling, but the same mechanism can also reinforce aggression, bullying, or substance abuse.

4.2 Aggression and Media Violence

One of the most widely researched areas in media psychology is the link between media violence and aggressive behavior. Numerous studies have shown that exposure to violent films, video games, and news can desensitize viewers and increase aggressive tendencies, especially in young audiences. The General Aggression Model (GAM) explains how repeated exposure to media violence leads to the development of aggressive scripts and reduced empathy. While not all viewers are equally affected, certain personality traits and environmental contexts (e.g., lack of parental supervision) can amplify the behavioral effects of violent content.

4.3 Consumer Behavior and Materialism

Media advertising plays a central role in shaping consumer habits and reinforcing materialistic values. Through carefully designed visual cues, emotional appeals, and celebrity endorsements, advertisements influence buying decisions and brand loyalty. Reality shows, influencer marketing, and product placements further blur the line between entertainment and advertising. Over time, audiences may begin to equate self-worth with consumption, a phenomenon known as symbolic consumption, where products become expressions of identity.

4.4 Social Conformity and Peer Influence

Social media platforms, with their emphasis on visibility, feedback, and peer approval, exert strong social conformity pressures. Users often adapt their opinions, behavior, and appearance to align with perceived norms within their digital communities. The desire for likes, shares, and validation can drive individuals to engage in trending challenges, express popular opinions, or alter their appearance to fit aesthetic ideals. This constant feedback loop reinforces groupthink, discouraging dissent and critical thinking.

4.5 Political Behavior and Civic Participation

Media significantly influences political behavior, from voting decisions to civic engagement. News framing, political advertisements, and social media campaigns shape political narratives, candidate perceptions, and public opinion. The phenomenon of slacktivism—performing minimal online activism like sharing posts—illustrates how media can create an

illusion of participation without substantive action. Conversely, movements like #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter show how digital media can mobilize real-world change and collective action.

4.6 Risk Behaviors and Social Norms

Exposure to media depictions of risky behaviors—such as smoking, drug use, reckless driving, or unsafe sexual practices—can influence audiences to perceive these actions as normal or even desirable. Media’s role in social norming is powerful; when such behaviors are frequently portrayed without negative consequences, viewers may underestimate the associated risks. Educational interventions and counter-advertising campaigns are essential to challenge these media-induced norms.

Media is, therefore, not just a mirror of society—it is also an architect of behavior. Through subtle cues, dramatic narratives, and persuasive appeals, it molds actions, lifestyle choices, and social expectations. Recognizing these behavioral impacts is vital for educators, policymakers, and content creators committed to fostering a media-literate and ethically conscious public.

5. Media and Society: Case Studies

While theories and psychological models offer valuable frameworks to understand media influence, real-world case studies illustrate how these dynamics unfold across different social contexts. This section analyses selected cases where media significantly shaped public thought, behavior, and societal outcomes, focusing on crisis communication, identity representation, and political polarization. These examples help ground the theoretical discussions in practical, observable impacts.

5.1 Media-Induced Panic During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The global COVID-19 pandemic serves as a prominent case where media played a dual role: disseminating essential health information and inadvertently fueling public anxiety. Continuous, graphic news coverage of infection rates, deaths, and lockdowns triggered widespread fear, stress, and uncertainty. Sensationalist headlines and misinformation on social media contributed to emotional contagion, amplifying public panic and even encouraging panic-buying behaviors (e.g., hoarding sanitizers or medicines). While

responsible journalism helped promote preventive behaviors like mask-wearing and vaccination, poorly regulated media narratives also spread conspiracy theories, vaccine hesitancy, and stigma—demonstrating the psychological power of framing and repetition.

5.2 Body Image and Beauty Standards in Media

Mass media, particularly fashion magazines, television shows, and image-centric platforms like Instagram, has long been criticized for promoting unrealistic body ideals. The glorification of thinness, fair skin, and curated perfection has contributed to body dissatisfaction, especially among women and adolescents. Research links excessive exposure to such content with eating disorders, depression, and low self-esteem. Campaigns like Dove’s “Real Beauty” and the emergence of body-positive influencers have begun to counteract these trends, but the pressure to conform to digitally altered standards remains pervasive. This case highlights the need for inclusive representation and media literacy to promote healthier self-perceptions

5.3 Media and Political Polarization

The rise of ideologically segmented media—where audiences consume news that aligns with their beliefs—has led to increased political polarization. In democracies like the United States and India, television debates, partisan online outlets, and echo chambers on social media have created environments where opposing views are vilified, and consensus becomes elusive. Confirmation bias and algorithmic filtering intensify this divide by reinforcing pre-existing beliefs and excluding counter-narratives. Political polarization fueled by media has contributed to distrust in democratic institutions, social fragmentation, and even violence—as seen in election-related unrest and mob mobilization via WhatsApp or Twitter.

5.4 Viral Movements and Collective Action

Despite its challenges, media has also empowered grassroots movements and collective advocacy. Campaigns like #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, and India’s #JusticeforSSR illustrate how digital platforms can mobilize emotional energy into civic action. Hashtag activism allows underrepresented voices to be heard, fosters solidarity, and pressures institutions to respond. While some critique this as symbolic or transient, the psychological sense of belonging and moral conviction generated through these platforms cannot be ignored. These

cases show how media can foster empathy, awareness, and real-world change when harnessed constructively.

5.5 Media and Moral Panics

From video games allegedly inciting violence to fears over internet addiction and OTT content corrupting youth, media has often been at the centre of moral panics. Fueled by sensational reporting and political rhetoric, such narratives frame certain technologies or cultural shifts as threats to societal values. While sometimes rooted in genuine concern, these panics often exaggerate risks, distract from systemic issues, and marginalize specific groups. The psychology behind moral panic includes groupthink, scapegoating, and authoritarian reaction—all of which highlight the media's role in directing social anxieties.

These case studies underscore the multifaceted influence of media on society. Whether promoting fear, identity crisis, social division, or civic empowerment, media acts as both a reflection and a driver of psychological and behavioral trends. Recognizing these patterns is essential for building a media ecosystem that informs rather than manipulates, connects rather than divides.

6. Media Ethics and Media Literacy

As media continues to shape individual cognition and societal behavior, ethical concerns surrounding its content, delivery, and impact become increasingly urgent. The power of media to influence public perception and action brings with it a responsibility to adhere to ethical standards that prioritize truth, inclusivity, and the psychological well-being of audiences. At the same time, equipping citizens with the tools to critically engage with media is essential to prevent manipulation and misinformation. This section addresses the twin pillars of responsible media influence: media ethics and media literacy.

6.1 The Need for Ethical Journalism

Journalistic ethics are grounded in principles of accuracy, objectivity, fairness, and accountability. In practice, however, the pressures of sensationalism, competition for viewership, and political or commercial interests can lead to the violation of these standards. The psychological implications are serious—misinformation can foster public confusion; biased reporting can deepen social divisions; and dehumanizing content can desensitize or

mislead audiences. Ethical journalism must strive to minimize harm, protect vulnerable communities, and provide balanced perspectives.

Key ethical challenges include:

- Sensationalism: Exaggerated reporting that prioritizes emotion over fact.
- Clickbait and Disinformation: Misleading headlines or fabricated content designed to attract traffic or serve an agenda.
- Stereotyping: Reinforcing harmful assumptions about gender, race, religion, or class.
- Invasion of Privacy: Exploiting personal trauma for public consumption.

To mitigate these, professional codes such as those from the Press Council of India, UNESCO, and international journalism associations should be actively enforced, and journalists must receive continuous ethical training.

6.2 The Ethics of Algorithms and Artificial Intelligence

In the digital era, much of media influence is mediated through algorithmic systems—from social media newsfeeds to YouTube recommendations. These systems, though efficient, lack ethical reasoning and often reinforce biases. Filter bubbles, echo chambers, and content amplification can subtly distort users' worldviews. Ethical media technology must prioritize transparency, user agency, and diversity of content. Media organizations should collaborate with technologists to ensure that AI in media serves public interest, not just profit.

6.3 Promoting Media Literacy

While ethical production is crucial, so is ethical consumption. Media literacy refers to the ability to access, analyse, evaluate, and create media in a variety of forms. It empowers audiences to critically engage with content, recognize bias, and resist manipulation. In psychological terms, media literacy enhances metacognition—the awareness of how one thinks and why one reacts to certain content.

Essential media literacy skills include:

- Distinguishing fact from opinion or propaganda.
- Understanding media ownership and agendas.
- Identifying emotional manipulation and logical fallacies.
- Recognizing visual and language-based persuasion techniques.

Media literacy should be integrated into school curricula, teacher training, and public awareness campaigns. Civil society, educators, media institutions, and governments must work together to promote an informed and reflective media culture.

6.4 Media Professionals as Ethical Agents

Journalists, editors, and content creators must be seen not only as information providers but also as psychological influencers with the power to shape public mood, thought, and behavior. This role demands ethical awareness, cultural sensitivity, and a commitment to mental health. Ethical reflection should be built into newsroom practices, including editorial meetings, story selection, and social media engagement.

Media ethics and literacy are not abstract ideals—they are essential tools for navigating a world where media shapes reality. By fostering responsibility among content creators and critical thinking among consumers, society can reclaim media as a force for education, empathy, and democratic vitality.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

The influence of media on the human psyche and society is both profound and pervasive. From shaping individual thought patterns and emotional states to guiding public discourse and social behavior, media plays an undeniable role in defining how we understand ourselves and the world around us. As this paper has explored, the psychological impact of media operates through various mechanisms—cognitive framing, emotional contagion, narrative immersion, observational learning, and social conditioning—all of which have tangible consequences for individual well-being and collective social dynamics.

The digital transformation of media has intensified these effects, introducing new ethical dilemmas and psychological risks. Social media, algorithm-driven content, and immersive visual platforms have made media consumption an around-the-clock experience, often blurring the line between reality and representation. While media can inform, empower, and unite, it can also mislead, polarize, and manipulate.

Given this dual capacity, the responsibility of both media producers and consumers becomes paramount. Ethical journalism, inclusive representation, and psychologically informed storytelling are necessary to ensure media contributes positively to public life.

Simultaneously, fostering media literacy at all levels of society is essential for creating an informed, critical, and resilient public.

Key Recommendations

1. **Integrate Media Literacy in Education:** Schools and universities should make media literacy a mandatory part of the curriculum to equip young minds with the ability to critically evaluate media content.
2. **Promote Ethical Journalism Practices:** Media houses must adopt clear codes of conduct, provide training in ethical reporting, and discourage sensationalism and bias.
3. **Ensure Transparency in Algorithms:** social media and news aggregators must make their content curation processes transparent and allow users more control over their media environments.
4. **Support Inclusive and Diverse Representation:** Content creators must reflect the diversity of society and avoid reinforcing stereotypes that affect self-esteem, identity, and social cohesion.
5. **Encourage Interdisciplinary Research:** Scholars in psychology, media studies, sociology, and computer science must collaborate to study the evolving impact of media and develop evidence-based interventions.
6. **Raise Public Awareness:** Governments, NGOs, and media regulators should launch campaigns to raise awareness about misinformation, emotional manipulation, and ethical consumption.
7. **Create Mental Health Guidelines for Media Exposure:** Mental health professionals and educators should offer guidance on healthy media habits, screen time, and coping strategies for emotionally intense content.

In conclusion, media is more than a mirror to society—it is a force that actively molds thoughts, emotions, and actions. Understanding its psychological influence is not only an academic imperative but a social necessity in the 21st century. As we navigate this complex media landscape, balancing technological innovation with ethical responsibility and psychological awareness will be key to safeguarding both individual autonomy and democratic integrity.

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