Examining Personal Experiences of Repeated Exposure to Violent Content in Social Media in Young Adults using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Abstract

The personal experiences of 10 students repeated exposure to violence in social media were investigated using semi-structured self-devised interviews with the aim of gaining an understanding of their perspectives. Interpretative phenomenological analysis was used to break the interviews down into themes in order to analysis the data and interpret the participant's interpretation of their experience of violent content in social media. Superordinate themes found were 'curiosity in violent imagery remains after repeated exposure' (Theme 1) which explained why individuals uncovered violent content, 'emotional reactivity is reduced after repeated exposure' (Theme 2) which took individual's immediate reaction viewing violent content into account and lastly 'subsequent thoughts about violence are reduced after repeated exposure' (Theme 3) which showed reductions in duration and quantity of individuals thoughts about violent content following viewing violent content.

Further research is recommend specifically focusing on the novel theme 'Subsequent thoughts about violence are reduced after repeated exposure'. A suggestion for those who may want to replicate a similar study in the future is to add an additional question which asks participants how long they spend viewing violent content when they come into contact with it, this would be beneficial in analysing and interpreting future data.

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List of Abbreviations

IPA……………………………………....…Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

TA…………………………………………………..………..Thematic Analysis

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Introduction

This aim of this study was to investigate personal experiences of repeated exposure to violent content in social media in young adults using interpretative phenomenological analysis therefore, improving our understanding of young adults experience of violent content in social media and the effect it has on young adults everyday life. This studies' main purpose was to understand individual's decisions to uncover violent content and understand what the effect encountering social media violence repeatedly has through the interviewing of participants.

This literature review's objective is to differentiate the difference between mass and social media and then gain an understanding of existing research involving desensitisation to violent content in media. Mass media and social media are very similar but very different in certain ways. Mass media and social media both use images and audio content to communicate messages. Mass media is specific to newspapers, magazines, radio and television while social media is website and application based (Storehaug, 2018). Interactions within mass media are trivial. By contrast interactions are the backbone off which social media is built on and thrives off. Social media is an open system where the users constantly socialize with one another directly through messaging and indirectly by sharing content to their chosen public or private audience (Paul, 2014).

Defining areas surrounding online violence in this emerging field is difficult, and researchers might particularly benefit from using qualitative approaches as well as quantitative approaches (Patton et al., 2014), this complication with definitions surrounding online violence is the rationale for the use of a qualitative approach for this

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study. Research would benefit from qualitative studies as there is a possibility of identifying factors that have not yet been considered in relation to young adult's violent media exposure online. Patton et at. (2014) explains that there is little research on the effects of online aggression and there is a lack of standard definitions of online violence and therefore qualitative research should be beneficial in understanding online violence along with social media's association with young adult online violence. There is not much information on the outcomes of young adult's exposure with violence in social media in comparison to the outcomes of violence in a conventional sense (Patton et al., 2014).

Qualitative research is recommended for this study. It would be very difficult to monitor an individual's social media use and exposure to violent media every day. It is therefore necessary that self-report measures are used to identify how much violent media is being viewed and whether or not individuals feel effected. Fox (2013) stated that the use of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is critical in obtaining the greatest insights into individuals experience with violence and morbid material. This study was one of the first of its kind investigating the fascination behind morbid material online and was a predominantly American male sample. The themes identified within this study were 'clear motivations', 'positive significances', 'emotional numbness' and 'individual differences and similarities'. It concluded that future research is needed to explore the effects of viewing this material and that future research in other demographics could identify new themes. This is the justification for this studies use of an Irish sample and its use of IPA. Semi-structured qualitative research is effective for research involving understanding why individuals view violent content and

its effects (Fox, 2013) , as different areas of participant's own personal experience can be identified and investigated thoroughly (Smith & Osburn , 2003) It is important to study negative health effects of mobile phone exposure because of mobile phones quick development and effect on communicating and interacting (Thomée, Härenstam & Hagberg, 2011) .

Young adults are the best for this kind of study as they use social media more than adults (Subrahmanyam, Greenfield, Kraut, & Gross, 2001) and can articulate and understand better than those younger than them the effect this violent content may be having. Young adulthood is a period when the brain is still developing its cognitive functions (Arain, Haque, Johal, Mathur, Nel, Rais, ... & Sharma, S, 2013). and several psychological problems emerge for the first time (Paus, Keshavan, & Giedd, 2008). This is why it is so important to specifically examine exposure to violence in this age group. The witnessing of violence is a risk factor for substance abuse (Kilpatrick, Acierno, Saunders, Resnick, Best, & Schnurr, 2000). Although witnessing of violence is examined through first hand experience within this study it cannot be ignored the implications that observing violence repeatedly online may have on the development of young adults.

Desensitisation

Desensitisation results in decreased emotional response to stimuli after repeated exposure and is thought to help individuals cope with distress. Desensitisation to media violence can occur after continuous exposure to media violence in a short space of time (Fanti, 2009), individuals have been found to have lessened sympathy for victims of violence (Mullin & Linz, 1995) and increased pleasure viewing content (Fanti, 2009).

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Vossen, Piotrowski, and Valkenburg (2017) found media violence influenced desensitisation but in accordance to Fanti (2007) and contrary to what previous studies had found results showed a reduction in sympathy rather than empathy. This means that although participants understood how victims were feeling they did not pity them. This study used longitudinal data and had a sample of 516 families. Young adults are also at higher risk of viewing violent content than younger children and adults as they are online more (Subrahmanyam, Greenfield, Kraut, & Gross, 2001).

Desensitisation as a result of violent media is associated with reduced strength of negative reactions (David, Nias, & Phil, 1979) and two much exposure to violent scenes decreases the intensity of automatic negative responses (Huesmann & Kirwil, 2007). Young adults spend hours on their phone every day on social media and it is important that this subjection to media violence is investigated as this exposure to media violence over a long space of time is likely to have a more profound effect. Young adults are at higher risk to the negative consequences of this exposure as they are still developing cognitively during this exposure and may be exposed to more content than adults who may be less likely to view it (Crone and Konijn, 2018). Prolonged development of reflective processing and cognitive control can specifically make young adults reactive to emotion-arousing media (Crone and Konijn, 2018); what does this mean for emotion-arousing media such as violent media? They recommend future research is conducted studying how the brain activity found in their review relating to emotion-arousing media predicts emotional responses in young adults.

Media

A meta-analysis of short-term and long-term effects of media violence on aggression in children and adults found media violence exposure is associated with aggressive behaviours (Bushman & Huesmann, 2006). Kronenberger et al. (2005) indicated an association between exposure to violence in media and decreased executive functioning skills, this association was found to be significantly worse in young adults with previous aggressive-disruptive behaviour. This study was limited by its use of self-report measures and also measures used did not cover the full range of tests of executive functioning. Greitmeyer and Mügge (2014) carried out a meta-analysis of the effects of violent and prosocial video game play which compared 98 studies (n= 36,965). They found that exposure to aggressive games results in aggressive consequences. Although video game play is more interactive than solely viewing violent media it needs to be considered what the continuous exposure of this violent media through social media may be having on individuals. Even though video game play is becoming more realistic each year the graphics are still not as graphic as real life videos can be. This is what makes it important that new areas of media violence exposure such as social media are investigated.

Findings suggest exposure to violence is a risk factor for substance abuse regardless of gender or culture (Löfving-Gupta et al., 2018), this highlights the importance of investigating new areas of exposure to violence. A critique of the previous studies mentioned regarding media violence is although they use the word 'media' social media is not investigated within the studies and only mass media is investigated. A more recent study including social media concluded that applying social network analysis to predicting repeated offending was the way forward (Tsai,

Hsu, Chen, & Kao, 2019). This study sourced its data from the criminal data warehouse

platform of New Taipei City Police Department which is a city with a population of

approximately 3.9 million. The platform combined 41 databases linked to several police

activities and used a social network analysis software to allow them to see the criminal

networks. Despite this study only comparing social networking connections it has major

implications highlighting social media's negative aspects and how can can lead to

undesirable acts of recidivism.

Social Media

Researchers studying violence should pay particular attention to young people

being exposed to violence through electronic media (Patton et al., 2014). Young adults

are repeatedly exposed to a variety of different content on social media every day.

Included within this variety of content are violent images. It is difficult to estimate how

much of this violent content is being viewed and by how many users.

These studies that research media violence that have been carried out in the past

are referring to mass media (tv and video games) when referring to media violence. It is

important that these studies be updated to include social media due its increasing

importance and prevalence in today's society (The rise of social media, 2019). The

amount of violent content and the effect that this content is having are both important.

In retrospect of media, social media is relatively young and distinct social media

platforms are "evolving organically" (O'Brien, 2018).

Social media has drastically advanced in recent years with growth in popularity

with social media platforms such as Facebook (est. 2004) and Instagram (est.2010)

which are arguably two of the most popular social media platforms among young adults

today. The date these platforms were established is relevant as the emphasis of how

recent they are is important. These websites are very different in content in 2020 in

comparison to when they first began. There are 3.484 billion active social media users

worldwide (Global Digital Report 2019, 2019) and there are 7.7 billion people in the

world in January 2020 (World Population Clock: 7.7 Billion People (2020) -

Worldometers, 2020).

This means that 45% of the population use social media. In the first quarter of

2019 Facebook's community standards enforcement report revealed it deleted 33.6

million posts containing graphic/violent content. Facebook hasn't published the amount

of views this violent content had before being removed and Facebook is also unable to

account for the material that was not found. It needs to be looked into how much of this

content is being viewed by young adults and the effect this is having as young people

are more likely to use social media than those older (The rise of social media, 2019).

Conclusion

The aim of this literature review was to gain an understanding of existing

research involving exposure to violent content in mass and social media. A range of

research was found in relation to violent content and mass media and little involving

social media. There is a gap in the literature where a closer look is needed at social

media and violent content and it is recommended previous research also be updated to

study social media alongside mass media. Lack of prior research involving social media

lead to the decision for the use of a self-designed questionnaire for this study.

Qualitative research is recommended as it is difficult to define areas around online

violence through quantitative research. The qualitative approach known as interpretative

phenomenological analysis (IPA) will be utilized as it will allow the information

gathered from the semi-structured interviews to be analysed and interpreted to their full

potential. IPA should give the researcher an understanding of individuals perceptions of

why they view this content and how it has affected them.

Young adults are best suited for this study as they can articulate their experience

on social media better than those who are younger than them and are more likely to

spend longer periods of time on their phones than those who are older. In conclusion

these past studies involving media violence need to be reconsidered involving social

media and this gap in the literature is what this study will aim to focus on, specifically

why individuals uncover violent content and improv our understanding of young adults

experience of violent content in social media.

Methods

Participants

Participants (5 men, 5 women, Mage $=19.6$, age range 18-21) consisted of

students currently attending the National college of Ireland who had previously been

exposed to violent content within social media.   Creswell (1998) recommends between

5 to 25 interviews for phenomenological studies while Clarke (2010) suggested that 3 is

the default sample size for undergraduate student's interpretative phenomenological

analysis study, this is the justification for the proposed sample size of 10 young adults.

Posters (see appendices E) were placed around the college stating the nature of the study

along with a contact email. Those who wanted to participate emailed in response to this

poster and following this they were informed of the nature of the study in detail and a

date was arranged while any questions asked were answered. . The information sheet

was provided along with the response email (see appendices C) and if they wanted like

to take part their consent was be received in the form of a signature on the consent

sheet.

Table 1.

Demographics of participants

Participant	Age	Gender	Nationality	Social Media Usage	Uncovers Violent Content
A	20	Male	Irish	Everyday	Yes
B	18	Male	Irish	Everyday	Yes
C	20	Female	Irish	Everyday	Yes
D	18	Male	Irish	Everyday	Yes
E	20	Male	Irish	Everyday	Yes
F	20	Female	Irish	Everyday	No
G	19	Female	Irish	Everyday	Yes
H	21	Female	Irish	Everyday	Yes
I	20	Male	Irish	Everyday	Yes
J	20	Female	Irish	Everyday	Yes

Measures/material

A self-devised semi-structured interview was devised for this study as what was being investigated was new. The interview was piloted using two participants to ensure that it was effective and following the pilot two questions were added to the interview (see appendices A). Semi-structured interviews that used open ended questions allowed for long descriptive answers where participants subjective experience could be investigated using interpretative phenomenological analysis. This allowed the researcher to understand the interviewees attitudes without leading questions which could affect their answers. The use of qualitative research makes it easier for the identification of potential research questions for the future. Phenomenology designs allowed participants to describe their own experience of events. The opening statement of the interview in this study was adapted from Bryan, Moran, Farrell, and O'Brien (2000) opening paragraph in their interview. This opening statement informed participants of the nature of what was being investigated and how questions had no

right/wrong answers and were not designed to influence their answers (see Appendices A).

As the researcher had a specific topic regarding young adults attitudes in relation to why they uncover violent content and understand their experience with repeated exposure to social media violence, questions were designed to ask how much participants used social media platform to get an idea of their usage. Participants were given as much time as they needed to answer each question.

Design

The research design is a non-experimental phenomenology design consisting of semi-structured qualitative interviews asking participants about their feelings and views as to why they watch violent media and how viewing violent media has affected them (see Appendices A). The non-probability sampling method known as convenience sampling was used. Convenience sampling was used due to the subjective nature of the topic to access those who come across violent content within social media. Participants were all over 18 years old. Their age and gender were recorded at the start of each interview to determine who the sample consisted of. The researcher chose a non-experimental design of participants who had already been viewing violent content for two reasons. Firstly, there are ethical issues surrounding exposing participants to violent content for the purpose of research. Secondly these participants have been viewing this content for prolonged periods of time allowing the researcher to infer the long-term effects within the cross-sectional nonexperimental study instead of only being able to infer short term effects with a cross sectional experimental study. This study is also only interested in repeated exposure to violence. The researcher obtained approval to conduct

this study from the National College of Ireland ethics committee following the

completion of a human research ethics proposal form while following the guidelines of

the PSI code of professional ethics (PSI, 2011) and the National College of Ireland

ethical guidelines and procedures for research involving human participants.

Procedure

After participants had requested to participant in the study through email then

they were explained the nature and aims of the interview and what it entails within the

information sheet (see appendices C). If the participant indicated they were happy to

proceed then a time and a place was arranged. They also had the information verbally

explained to them and were asked if they fully understand what had been explained. If

any areas were not understood they were explained in a more simplified manner to

participants until fully understood. Before the interview the participant read the

information sheet and informed consent sheet (see appendices B and C). If they were

happy to continue, then informed consent was obtained from participants after reading

sheets through a tick placed on consent sheet rather than a signature and the interview

commenced. (see appendices A). The interview covered young adults experience with

violence in social media and how often they come across violent content. The

participant was not required to answer questions they are uncomfortable discussing and

had most control in the interview. Participants were not showed any violent content and

risk of psychological harm was nothing outside of what participant's came across in

everyday life. Participants had the right to withdraw at any point while taking part. No

use of deception was necessary within this study. The participant was allowed to take a

break whenever they felt the need and could stop the interview at any time, although

this was not necessary. They were questioned whether or not they chose to uncover this content when it was hidden and if they share this among friends in any way. They were asked about the effects they feel viewing this content has had on them and how different the effects are now to when they first came across them. 5 female and 5 male participants were interviewed, and these interviews took place over a three-week period depending on participant availability. Following the interview the participant was be debriefed and provided a debriefing sheet which contained the details of helplines and avenues for receiving support in the event that participants became any way distressed as a result of the nature of the topic being studied. All data was transcribed to text following interviews and fully anonymised. These data from these transcripts were transcribed were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) Analysis

IPA is the approach best suited to this study as it is interpretative and phenomenological such is the subjective experience of repeated exposure on social media being investigated. The approach IPA derives from the basis that people are not neutral perceivers of actual reality, but rather come to view and appreciate their environment by formulating their own biographical stories in a way the makes sense to them (Brocki, & Wearden, 2006). Smith and Osburn (2003) explain how a double hermeneutic is involved in IPA analysis which is a two-stage interpretation in which the researcher makes sense of the participants understanding of their experience. IPA is different from other analysis' as it consists of trying to understand the participants point of view and how they see the world which the researcher tries to make sense of. It is

committed to trying to extract personal experiences from people by enabling

respondents to share their own narrative in their own terms (Noon, 2018), this was taken

into account when designing the semi-structured interview for this study where the

researcher designed open-ended questions allowing for descriptive answers.

Fox (2013) stated in their study that the use of IPA is critical in obtaining the

greatest insights into individuals experience with violence and morbid material, they

justify their use of IPA explaining IPA was the main factor in addressing the research

question inductively without the use of prior study's inaccessible preconceptions,

conclusions or knowledge, but still focusing on background research on the

psychological and physiological consequences primarily of fictional morbid content. It

concluded that future research is needed to explore the effects of viewing this material.

This is the justification for this study and its use of IPA.

IPA gives the ability to take the information collected as a whole or chose

specific areas to cite (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). IPA differs from thematic

analysis as IPA consists of two levels of theme development which are emergent themes

and superordinate themes and thematic analysis (TA) has one level of theme

development (Braun & Clarke , 2019). Braun and Clarke (2019) recommend to use TA

while answering research questions that do not involve people's experiences or

perceptions. The researcher felt IPA was more beneficial than TA for this study as it

allowed then ability to delve into the participants experience in the interpretation for a

more in-depth understanding.

It is carried out on small sample sizes to allow for an in-depth analysis of

experiences. IPA aims to discuss an individual's understanding and point of view rather

than make generalizations although it is not against this. Interviews were tape recorded

as according to Smith and Osburn (2003) it is not possible to capture every detail

needed for IPA and allows interview to run fluently. These tapes were transcribed to

text and read over multiple times. Initial notes were made next to transcripts and

relevant areas highlighted. These initial notes developed emergent themes. IPA was

used to identified themes from emergent themes which clustered into subordinate

themes and then finally superordinate themes. This approach was a bottom up approach

that was data driven not theoretical. Following this themes were separated into tables.

Self-Reflection

Smith and Osburn (2003) discuss how interpretation in IPA analysis is restricted

by the researchers own perceptions but this is also necessary to make sense of the

participants interpretation of how they see the world. It is therefore necessary that a

brief description of the researchers experience with this content is included in order to

get an understand of any perceptions that may influence the analysis of data.

The researcher is a 20 year old female psychology student currently in final year

of a BA (Hons) in Psychology. The researcher is sometimes exposed to violent content

on some social media platforms but not on a regular basis. After noticing various

individuals on her social media choosing to share this content it led to her reflecting on

why individuals chose to uncover and view this content and what effect repeated

exposure to this content was having. The researcher does not understand herself as to

why she views this content but did not come across it on a regular basis. Fox (2013)

used the term 'informed outsider' to describe an individual such as this who did not

know too much information but also did not know too little and was therefore suited to

interpret the data.

Summary of themes

Transcripts were reviewed by the researcher and important areas were

highlighted and noted. Table 2 consists of initials notes obvious from the first analysis

of themes. The researcher reviewed the content within Table 2 for relationships from

which themes emerged. Superordinate themes were derived from emergent themes

where similar experiences were expressed across participants. The 3 superordinate

themes identified by the researcher's analysis were; 'curiosity in violent imagery

remains after repeated exposure' (Theme 1) which explained why individuals uncovered

violent content, 'changes in emotional reactivity' (Theme 2) which took individuals

immediate reaction viewing violent content into account and focus attention on

desensitisation and lastly 'reductions in subsequent thoughts about violent content'

(Theme 3) which emphasized reductions in duration and quantity of individuals

thoughts following viewing violent content. These were all the themes identified by the

researcher. This was beneficial as all could by analysed and it was unnecessary that any

be excluded. The results section was structured around the master themes found.

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Results

Analysis of themes

Table 2: Emergent themes from reading initial transcripts

Decision to uncover process	Impact over time	Impact in period following
Curiosity of what's beneath	Just another video	Doesn't keep up at night
Interest in what's behind it	Not as extreme	Forgets content
	Used to content	
Told its bad therefore more	Reaction reduced	Does not think about minutes later
	Inhumane to content	
Intrigued to click	Numb to content but still feels pity towards victims	Moves on
Drawn in by covered	Desensitised	
Unknown secret	Not effected to same extent as before	Does not think about as long as before
Way the world is	Loses meaning	Reduced amount of thoughts about content
Need to see what everyone else has- feelings of regret following	Less shocked and disgusted more intrigued	
	Doesn't seem real anymore	
Does not feel bothered		

Table 3. Superordinate themes and their source

Superordinate Theme	Arising from
Curiosity in violent imagery remains after repeated exposure	Drive and reasoning (curiosity, drawn in, effect and society) that leads to uncovering of content regularly regardless of known effect
Emotional reactivity is reduced after repeated exposure	Changes in feelings surrounding violent content
Subsequent thoughts about violence are reduced after repeated exposure	Decreased amount of thoughts about violent content and in period of time thoughts about violent content experienced

Curiosity in violent imagery remains after repeated exposure

        Reoccurring reasons as to why participants chose to uncover violent content on a

regular basis despite being aware of the negative effect this content had on them was

evident across the data. The superordinate theme, 'curiosity in violent imagery remains

after repeated exposure' (Table 3) explains why participants chose to actively uncover

and therefore observe violent content, this incentive to uncover and observe was

expressed and arised from participant's drive and reasoning (curiosity, drawn in, effect

and society) that leds to uncovering of content regularly regardless of the known effect.

        9 out of 10 participants chose to uncover violent content when scrolling through

social media platforms with the main reason for uncovering generally being curiosity.

Participant's 1, 8, 9 and 10 all used the word 'curious' in their reasoning underlying

why they uncovered violent content;

*"I guess I'm just curious as to what's there you know cause you see that its covered and
then you want to know what's underneath it, it gives you like incentive to open it like
otherwise I might just swipe past it"* (9, 20)
Participant 8 goes into more detail of their curiosity stating feeling "less

shocked/disgusted by it and more just intrigued about what's going on." (8, 21) here

their curiosity outweighs their negative emotions.

        Participant 3 described being more interested by covered content and how it

"makes you more intrigued to click it, I guess. It draws you in" (3, 20). Similarly,

participant 4 described the covered content as a *"secret you don't know"* (4, 18) and

described wanting to know "*what's behind the blurred box you know, could be*

something cool" (4, 18)

        Participant 8 describes being dragged in by violent content and expressing an

awareness of knowing the content does not have a good effect on them stating *"I don't*

want to keep watching because I know violence or gruesome content is coming" (8, 21)

but also describes an inability not to look at the content;

> *"but I'm too engrossed and invested in knowing what happens that I feel I can't stop watching. Violent content drags the viewer in too easily"* (8, 21)

This suggests some individuals may be experiencing some variations of

cognitive dissonance when choosing to uncover and view violent content as their

awareness of how negative the content they choose to uncover is comes into conflict

with their behavioural decision of uncovering this content.

Participant 5 chose to uncover content purely because they did not feel phased by

violent content *"I don't feel like it bothers me that much"* (5, 20) and therefore did not

feel there were any undesirable effects to viewing this content and therefore it was the

same as any other in terms of the effect it had on them personally.

Participant 6 was the only participant to report avoiding the uncovering and viewing of

violent content;

"I just try to avoid it because it upsets me. They're not always covered so sometimes on reddit depending on the subreddits you follow they're not tagged so you see it and then I hide the post." (6, 20)
 Participant 6 indicated coming across lots of violent content but did not uncover violent

content if covered. Participant 6 expressed being very aware of the effect this content

had "*images stick in my mind particularly"* (6, 20).

Although participant 5 and 6 were drastically different to one another with

participant 5 choosing to uncover and view violent content as they felt it did not affect

them and participant 6 choosing not to uncover and view violent content due to the

intense effect it had on them, they both displayed similarities in one area. This was their

self-awareness of their thoughts and emotions relating to the violent content and

therefore any effects this content had on them. Depending on whether there was an

effect or not they chose to uncover the content. All other participants chose to uncover

content as they were 'curious' as to what was there but did not actively chose to or not

to uncover because of the effect violent content had on them.

Participant 3 stated how they wanted to view content because "*it's telling you

like that its bad to see*" (3, 20) and similarly participant B talked about how it was

because they're not supposed to,

*"I have an interest in what's behind it, you know the whole thing that if you're not
supposed to do something you've more of a drive to do it"* (2, 18).

At this point certain individual's personality traits show in some as their

descriptions describe an opposing to conforming and following rules.

Participant 8 appears to have a fear of missing out and reports wanting to see

"what everyone else who has watched the video has seen.'' (8, 21). It indicates that they

want to stay constantly connected with what others see and have a persistent fear that

others may benefit from watching something they may that. Participant 3 also answers

in relation to others but on a slightly different means as they do not describe a fear of

missing out. Participant 5 asserted *"it's the way the world is and why should I be

uncomfortable to see what's going on"* (5, 20). This suggests that the participant does

not feel as though they should feel discomfort from the viewing of violent content as it

is what is happening in everyday life. The participant's use of a question in this

statement is interesting as they ask 'why should I' rather than I am not uncomfortable

which leads the researcher to question whether or not they watch the content because

they do not feel uncomfortable by it or whether they feel uncomfortable by it but they

feel they need to watch it as it is the was society is. Participant 5 also identified seeing

more violent content after "major news stories are uncovered" (5, 20) and "terrorist

incidents".

The characteristics indicated above within the theme 'incentive' are consistent

with finding of Fox (2013) where a clear motivation was discussed as the reasons that

motivated individuals to make viewing violent content a part of their everyday lives.

Emotional reactivity is reduced after repeated exposure

The superordinate theme 'emotional reactivity is reduced after repeated

exposure' (Table 3) was displayed within the self-reported changes in participants

emotional reactions to violent content after repeated exposure to violent content.

Participants answers varied within this theme with a many of the participants self-

reporting feeling desensitised and others indicating some level of desensitisation.

Participant 5 appeared apathetic about their desensitisation even while stated

they had "definitely been desensitised I'd say a 100%" (5, 20) although this is the same

participant who felt unbothered by viewing violent content in general and this apathy

may be specific to their personality type.

 Participant 1, 2 and 7 all described being *"used to"* content and this was their reasoning

as to why their reactions had reduced. This suggests that they were aware of the effects

this content was having.

Participant 7 described how this content becomes normal stating as they *"see it*

so much and so often it just kinda loses it meaning and it's just something you see every

day " (7, 19) and *"The more I saw it the more normal part of your day and the internet*

it was. It just doesn't affect you as much because you're so used to seeing it." (7, 19)

Violent content appears to become normalised among some individuals as they become used to seeing it every day and it is expected just as much as any other video.

Participant 1 and 9 both used the phrase "just another video" when talking about the violent content as if they felt it was no different to other content they viewed on a regular basis. They used this phrase to justify why their reaction had change with participant 1 following up with "*like I don't feel anything*" (1, 20) and participant I following up with *"I don't really have much of a reaction to them anymore to be honest"* (9, 20)

Participant 8 describes having no change in reaction but being more desensitised;

"my reaction is pretty similar still, but I'd probably be more desensitised to the content" (8, 21)
This suggests participants own definition or understanding of what desensitisation is may vary either due to personal beliefs or lack of knowledge of the definition.

Participant 8 appears to believe desensitisation is a more cognitive than emotional response.

Participant 4 makes a quite contradictory statement;

"I'm inhumane to it now like I don't react I just feel pity for them, but it doesn't affect me. I'm numb to it" (4, 18)
This may be interpreted as they don't feel upset or any other intense emotions as a result of the content but do sympathise with the victims, although they use the word inhumane the researcher does not believe the participant is inhumane to the content as they feel pity for the victims. The emotions they describe having do not affect them personally which is why they express feeling numb to it but there are still some levels of emotion.

The characteristics indicated above within the theme 'emotional reactivity is reduced after repeated exposure' are consistent in some ways with findings of Fox (2013) where the superordinate theme of 'emotional numbness was found.

Subsequent thoughts about violence are reduced after repeated exposure

The superordinate theme of 'subsequent thoughts about violence are reduced after repeated exposure' (Table 3) was the least expected of all themes but was the most interesting and has the most implications. All 10 participants displayed reductions in either their period of time experiencing thoughts about violent content following repeated exposure or reductions in amount of thoughts about violent content following repeated,

Participant 1 described being aware of how it was somewhat bad that there was less of an effect on their thoughts now compared to when they first viewed the violent content *"it's like that terrible but it doesn't keep me up at night, ill forget about it after watching it"* (1, 20) and similarly Participant 3 stated "I wouldn't think about it ten minutes later but before I would have kept thinking about it (3, 20) and talked about how previously they would have been *"stuck on it and talk about it lots"* (3, 20) but now does not. Participant 1 described reduced in their emotional reactions but participant 3 described still reacting strongly to the content. This is relevant as participant 3 describes the effect following the video on their thoughts as nothing when they still react strongly initially.

Participants 1 explanation for this reduction in subsequent thoughts was "seeing it so much it's like I just move on" (1, 20) and participant 5 declared *"right now after*

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seeing something like that I'm like ok cool next" (5, 20) This suggests that repeated

viewing of these videos reduced the time individuals dwell on them afterwards.

Participant 6 was the only participant to describe not uncovering and viewing violent

content when covered but also coming across it regularly. Interesting they described a

coping method they had developed for themselves when coming cross this content

which consisted of telling themselves the content, they had seen was fictional and

therefore was not upsetting. This also reduced their subsequent thoughts following

coming into the unwanted contact with violent content;

"you'd be thinking about it for like days and like if I saw something now, I'd be like god that's horrible, but I'd convince myself it's not real." (6, 20)
Similar to participant 6, participant I explained the reason the content did not affect

them anymore was as it didn't *"seem real anymore"* (6, 20) it is possible that they may

have subconsciously developed a coping method that was the same as participant 6 but

was not aware.

Discussion

This aim of this study was to investigate personal experiences of repeated exposure to violent content in social media in young adults therefore, improving our understanding of young adult's experiences of violent content in social media and the effect it has on young adult's everyday life. IPA was the data analysis method used by the researcher to gain an understanding of the participants understanding of their experience with violent content on social media platforms. The superordinate themes 'curiosity in violent imagery remains after repeated exposure' (theme 1) and 'emotional reactivity is reduced after repeated exposure' (theme 2) were in accordance with previous research. 'Subsequent thoughts about violence are reduced after repeated exposure' (theme 3) was an unexpected theme that emerged from this study and reductions in these thoughts were obvious across all participants involved. To the researcher's knowledge this theme had not been found in previous research.

Participants expressed feeling a desire to uncover videos despite the negative emotional response watching the video may have. This finding is in accordance with previous research that has found curiosity rather than pleasure relate positively to exploratory behaviour online (Zhao, Lu, Wang & Huang, 2011). Curiosity is an essential motivating emotion that connects novelty and challenge signals with natural behaviours like exploration, studying and learning (Kashan & Steger, 2007).

It is questionable whether individuals are choosing to uncover violent content with the intent of viewing violent content or purely to view content that is covered and continuing research investigating this is advised in further studies. It appears as though

covering violent content and giving individuals the option to uncover is having an effect that in some ways contradicts the purpose of covering the videos. It may be detrimental to those inclined to have a more curious disposition than others and those who do not consider the extent the effects of viewing this content may be having on them. Although covering this content can be beneficial as it prevents some individuals from ever coming into contact with this content it may be more favourable to remove the content completely from social media platforms rather than allow some individuals the option of uncovering to view it. If individuals wish to view this type of content, they would still have the ability to view it on alternative websites.

A desire to uncover content because of a fear of missing out and a need to see what others see was recognised. This suggests individuals may use this knowledge obtained from viewing violent content for conversing with others or to prevent not knowing what others are conversing about even though they may not enjoy watching the content and may feel uncomfortable viewing the content. Participant's expressed coming into contact with more violent content than usual when major news stories and terrorist incidents occurred. It should be considered that more violent content is acted upon/removed than usual by larger social media platforms when these events occur.

The fact that these videos are covered appears to be making individuals more likely to uncover as it is may be exploiting their to desire to learn. Video covering may be making individuals more likely to click onto videos and view content.

Reductions in emotional reactions were shown in participants but on different levels. This may be due to the length of time spent viewing content when participants came into contact with it. If this study were to be conducted again the researcher would

add on an additional question asking participants how long they spent viewing the violent content before clicking off, this question would be added following the question "do you come across violent images/videos on social media?"

In relation to the individuals that still react but on a lesser scale and are aware of this reaction but still choose to uncover and view violent content their reasons for doing this despite their undesirable reaction may be due to the previous emergent themes discussed; curiosity or society or there is a possibility that the emotional reaction they are experiencing may be due to a drive to view the content because of the intensity of the emotions they experience viewing this content may be. This may be causing them to experience a sort of thrill. Watching this content allows individuals to experience strong emotions associated with distress or danger without ever being in any actual dangerous situations or leaving the comfort of my own home. These emotions induced by watching violent content may be driving individuals to watch despite the negative features. Participant's identified they were aware of being desensitised or identified being in the process of being desensitised.

Contrary to what previous studies had found (Fanti, 2007; Vossen, Piotrowski, and Valkenburg, 2017) results shown sympathy was not changed in participants. This was including the participant that conveyed feeling unbothered watching violent content, they expressed feeling pity towards those that were the subject of violence within the content.

'Subsequent thoughts about violence are reduced after repeated exposure' was the least expected yet most interesting superordinate theme. Even though participants varied greatly within 'emotional reactivity is reduced after repeated exposure' they all

displayed the same patterns of reduction in their subsequent thoughts. Reductions were expressed in the quantity of subsequent thoughts experienced by participants and the period of time following in which participants experienced these thoughts about the content.

It could be said that this reduction in the quantity and period of subsequent thoughts may be purely a factor of desensitisation but most definitions of desensitisation require changes in emotional response which was not the case in all a participants in this study as some displayed no emotional change but displayed reductions in subsequent thoughts. For the purpose of interpreting and understanding the experience of the participants in this study this 'desensitisation' was broken down into two superordinate themes which were 'emotional reactivity is reduced after repeated exposure' and 'subsequent thoughts about violence are reduced after repeated exposure'.

To the researcher's knowledge the novel theme of subsequent thoughts about violent content had not previously been identified. This reduction in intrusive thoughts following repeated exposure to violent content may be explained as a sort of automatic form of a rational coping strategy that protects individuals from being affected in the aftermath of being exposed to content. As participants identified being affected for a period time when they were initially exposed to violent content but now are unphased, it is important what the implications of what these reductions may be having are. It is therefore recommended that future research focusing specifically on the theme of reductions of subsequent thought about violence is conducted to gain an in-depth understanding of this reduction and its implications as currently too little is known to make suggestions.

Strengths and Limitations

This study has some caveats but also strengths. As the study relied on self-report measures and was conducted in person this may have made participants more likely to be deceitful for fear of judgements in relation to the topic but because this study was conducted in person it allowed the interviewer to ask further questions when participants briefly touched on topics and made it possible to dig deeper into answers and rephrase when misunderstood.

The researcher emphasizes congruently with Fox's (2013) IPA study that the findings are not for the purpose of generalizations and are to make general statements with discretion after interpreting the sample. Additionally, these statements can only be made in relation to Irish students until more research is conducted and future research on this topic using other demographics could identify more new themes in this area like the theme 'Subsequent thoughts about violence are reduced after repeated exposure' found in this study.

A small sample size of 10 participants participated in this study, this gave the researcher the ability to explore deeply into participants experiences and not miss information that may be missed in a larger sample size. The small sample size made it easier to familiarize transcripts and although it would normally be seen as a limitation in studies it was not in this study.

The researcher was an 'informed outsider' (Fox, 2013) which is seen as a strength for the interpreting an IPA study such as this once as the researcher was informed enough to understand participants but not too informed to have biases interpretating.

Conclusion

This study gained insights into young adults personal experiences in relation to repeated exposure to violent content in social media. The findings of this study are not for the purpose of generalisation, the findings purpose is to make general statements after the interpretative phenomenological analysis of the data.

This study adds the existing literature using an Irish sample, it is consistent with previous findings with the themes 'Curiosity in violent imagery remains after repeated exposure' and 'Emotional reactivity is reduced after repeated exposure' it also identifies the novel theme 'Subsequent thoughts about violence are reduced after repeated exposure'. This identification of this theme improves our understanding of young adults experience of violent content in social media and the effect it has on young adults everyday life. Further investigation into the novel theme 'Subsequent thoughts about violence are reduced after repeated exposure' is recommended and if this study were to be replicated it is suggested an additional question is added which asks participants how long they spend viewing violent content when they come into contact with it is added, this would be beneficial in analysing and interpreting future data.

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Appendix

Appendices A

Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

Interviewer

In this interview questions about attitudes about the experience of repeated

exposure to violent images/videos in social media and users will be queried. We are

interested in experience of the violent content ,not what is within the violent content; so

please bear this in mind when answering. These questions are developed from

statements made by various people at various times to express their own opinions about

these issues. These questions are not leading to express our feelings. We are interested

in finding out what you feel i.e. your opinion about these issues. There are no right or

wrong answers to any of these statements on which people have widely different views.

Take as long as you like to answer each question as it is likely that you will have

stronger views about some of these

Q1. Do you use your phone to access social media? How often?

Q2. Do you come across violent images/videos on social media? How often?

Q3. If a video is covered suggesting it contains violent or graphic content on social

media do you decide to undercover it? How come?

Q4. Have friends shown you violent images/videos on social media? If so how many

times?

Q5. Can you remember your reaction one of the first times you came across violent

images/videos on social media?

Q6. Describe your reaction (Question added after pilot)

Q7. Does it differ from your reaction now? How so? Do you still react?

Q8. Describe you reaction you do have? (Question added after pilot)

Q9. Do you feel seeing these has effected you in anyway in your everyday life? If so,

can you describe how?

Appendices B

Consent to take part in research

- I…………………………………… voluntarily agree to participate in this research

  study.

- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or

  refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.

    - I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview

  within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.

- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have

  had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.

- I understand that participation involves participating in an interview which is about

  my attitudes towards emotional desensitisation as a result of repeated exposure to

  violence in social media.

- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.

- I agree to my interview being audio-recorded.

- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.

- I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.

- I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in…list all forum in which you plan to use the data from the interview: dissertation, conference presentation, published papers etc.

- I understand that if I inform the researcher that myself or someone else is at risk of harm they may have to report this to the relevant authorities - they will discuss this with me first but may be required to report with or without my permission.

- I understand that signed consent forms and original audio recordings will be retained in [specify location, security arrangements and who has access to data] until [specific relevant period – for students this will be until the exam board confirms the results of their dissertation].

- I understand that a transcript of my interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for [specific relevant period – for students this will be two years from the date of the exam board].

- I understand that under freedom of information legalisation I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.

- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information. Names, degrees, affiliations and contact details of researchers (and academic supervisors when relevant).

Signature of research participant

--- ----------------

Signature of participant   Date

 Signature of researcher I believe the participant is giving informed consent to

participate in this study

 -- ---------------------

 Signature of researcher   Date

Appendices C

Information Sheet

A Qualitative Study of Attitudes of Young Adults Regarding Emotional

Desensitisation as a Result of Repeated Exposure to Violent Content on Social Media

 I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide you

need to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you.

Please take time to read the following information carefully. Ask questions if anything

you read is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide

whether or not to take part.

I am a final year psychology student in the National College of Ireland. This

research is being conducted for my thesis. The Aim of this study is understand the

attitudes of young adults regarding the emotional effects violent content on social media

has .

Taking part in this research involves taking part in a short interview lasting

approximately 45 minutes to one hour consisting of ten open ended questions. These

questions will involve your attitudes regarding the emotional effects violent content on

social media has. It is expected to be conducted in the National College of Ireland. You

must answer these questions as honestly as possible and the audio will be recorded.

You have been invited to take part as you are a young adult whose attitudes could be of value. The participation is completely voluntary and you have the right to refuse participation, refuse any question and withdraw at any time without any consequence at all.

The possible benefits of this research is it could help get a better understanding as to the negative effects of media violence in social media and spread awareness. It is possible that you could become distressed by this topic and if this happens the interview will stop immediately and you will be supported accordingly.

All data from this research will be encrypted and anonymised. The text and all research released to the public will be completely anonymous.

There are certain situations in which I may have to break confidentiality: if I have a strong belief that there is a serious risk of harm or danger to either you or another individual (e.g. physical, emotional or sexual abuse, concerns for child protection, rape, self-harm, suicidal intent or criminal activity) or if a serious crime has been committed. Non-anonymised data in the form of signed consent forms and audio recordings are collected and retained as part of the research process.

The audio from the interview will be recorded. The research data will be stored on a usb which will be encrypted. The only people who will have access to the data are the researchers. Data not needed will be disposed of.

Signed consent forms and original audio recordings will be retained in encrypted usb files which only the the researchers will have access to until after my degree has been conferred. A transcript of interviews in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for a further two years after this. Under freedom of

information legalisation you are entitled to access the information you have provided at

any time.'

The plan this research is to use it for my thesis. For further information contact

Ella Conroy at x17353333@student.ncirl.ie or insert supervisor here.

THANK YOU

Appendices D

Debrief

This sheet contains the contact numbers and ways to receive support for violence

or if the the interview topics have caused any feelings of distress. If none of these

contacts appeal to you and you feel as those you need support there are many other

contacts that can be provided if you ask. You can withdraw permission to use data from

my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be

deleted. *Support Leaflets will also be sourced and provided*

Niteline Student Support Helpline

Phone Number 1800 793 793

Opening hours: 9pm-2.30am during student term

Depression Support Helpline

Phone Number: 1800 80 4848

Opening hours: 10am-10pm Monday to Sunday

Womens Aid (victims of domestic violence) Helpline

Phone Number: 1800 341 900

Open 24 hours, seven days a week

Male Domestic Use Helpline

Phone Number:

Opening hours:

Monday: 10am-6pm

Tuesday: 12pm-8pm

Wednesday: 10am-6pm

Thursday: 12pm-8pm

Friday: 2pm-6pm

Appendices E

Poster

Appendices F

Transcript and Theme Breakdown Sample