

Factors of media text traumogenicity: The role of content and context¹

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Abstract

In modern scientific discourse the connection between the consumption of traumatic media content and the psychological state of the audience is, in principle, considered proven. However, the relationship between the type of content and the context of its consumption and the strength of the traumatic impact remains much less studied. In this article, the authors present the results of a study based on an uncontrolled experiment with audience members who consumed potentially traumatizing content. The results generally prove the association of violent content consumption with increased levels of situational anxiety and, in part, increased levels of depression. Nevertheless, a very high significance of the context of consumption, as well as the specificity of the source, which can offset the traumatizing effects of media content, was revealed. The authors suggest that in future studies these factors should be taken into account when studying the impact of media content on the psychological state of the audience.

Keywords

Media, content, trauma, situational anxiety, depression, media consumption, traumogenicity.

Introduction

The dissemination of vast amounts of information, particularly through online platforms, brings into focus issues that previously did not seem so important.

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In particular, we are talking about the impact on the audience of content produced by non-institutionalized media that are poorly controlled by normative and deontological instruments (Makeenko, & Vyrkovsky, 2021a, 2021b). By and large, the potential of this impact became clear relatively recently, about ten years ago, when platforms acquired the status of the largest actor in the media system, creating a unique environment for the production and distribution of media texts of any kind (Hess, 2014).

The virtually unlimited number of content producers on online platforms makes it crucial to identify and study the media effects of the media texts they distribute. These effects can be both positive and negative. By and large, the dominance of “platform” media consumption makes it necessary to add, if not revise, the theories of media effects that have long been successfully developed.

Overall, it is clear that the potential for harm to members of the audience - in particular, psychological harm - has radically increased. Despite the rich history of research on the phenomenology of “mediatized trauma” (Pinchevski, 2016; American Psychiatric Association, 2013), the issue of trauma and other variants of psychological damage (stress, anxiety, depression, etc.) through media texts distributed on online platforms remains rather underdeveloped (Mahamid, & Berte, 2020; Abdalla et al, 2021), also due to the relative youth of the phenomenon.

Recognizing the complexity and multidimensionality of the “psychological” impact of media on audiences (Holman et al, 2020), in this article the authors decided to focus primarily on some of its manifestations that have previously been poorly addressed in the literature or not at all.

Theoretical framework

As it was mentioned above, studies of “mediatized” trauma and other types of psychological damage are far from new for science. The mainstream of these works, confirmed by a number of meta-studies, is the recognition of the essential role of potentially traumatic content in the formation of both psychological trauma directly and other negative psychological consequences (Pfefferbaum, Nitiéma, & Newman, 2019, 2020; May, & Wisco, 2016; Holman et al, 2020; Abdalla et al, 2021).

However, almost all researchers, summarizing the previously obtained results, point to numerous gaps that do not allow us to speak about a full understanding of the mechanisms and consequences of exposure to media content containing potentially traumatic content (May, & Wisco, 2016). In particular, there are notable differences between psychological effects for

different age groups, which require clarification and additional research (Pfefferbaum, Nitiéma, & Newman, 2020). In addition, most of the research on this topic focuses on the traumatic consequences of consuming video content (primarily television content), which is a priori considered to have a higher potential for psychological impact (Pfefferbaum, Nitiéma, & Newman, 2019; Neria, & Sullivan, 2011). At the same time, other types of content are considered much less frequently.

In general, a traditionally small number of factors (variables) are used for studies of “mediatized” trauma and other psychological consequences of media consumption. For example, one large meta-study aggregating the results of 47 works of this kind (Pfefferbaum, Nitiéma, & Newman, 2019) proposes only eight sets of pre-selected variables: quantitative measures of audience contact with relevant media texts; the “man-made” and “natural” nature of the represented trauma; single incident and prolonged event; adult and youth audiences; direct exposure to the traumatic event and “mediated” through showing the aftermath; television content and synthetic forms of media texts; concrete event and abstract information about it; identification of certain posttraumatic symptoms and medically validated posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

In addition to all of the above, more often than not, studies of this kind contain three limitations that are important for the interpretation of the results obtained.

First. Researchers often work with the effects of relatively long-term media consumption, which allows us to talk about its cumulative effect on the psychological state of the audience (Holman et al, 2020; Abdalla et al, 2021). On the one hand, this is important from the point of view of specific psychological consequences for individuals and the audience as a whole, on the other hand, in this case it is difficult to assess the “contribution” of each piece of content (which can be very significantly different from others in a large number of characteristics) to the formation of the final psychological outcome.

Second. As a rule, studies of this kind are conducted in the form of a longitudinal study – that is, researchers conduct several waves of surveys to assess the psychological state of the audience after a potentially traumatic event and, accordingly, its representation in mass media (Holman et al, 2020; Neria, & Sullivan, 2011). This allows us to assess the dynamics of the psychological state formed as a result of media consumption, but it does not capture, obviously, the most acute psychological states that arise after the initial consumption of a traumatic media text, i.e. “familiarization” with the content.

Third. De facto works on this topic are most often devoted to current events and their representation in the media (Bernstein et al, 2007). At the same

time, audience members are bombarded daily with vast amounts of potentially traumatizing content not directly related to current events and/or related to a distant geographic region. Such events may not have a direct, immediate impact on the audience, but does their representation have an impact on the psychological state of consumers of media texts?

A separate issue, already mentioned above, is the specifics of media consumption on online platforms, which have become the main “supplier” of relevant information, at least for young audiences (Dunas et al, 2023). When compiling an information “menu” in social networks, the logic of source selection and, accordingly, the level of trust is extremely important, which somehow affects the psychological consequences of consuming a particular unit of content (Tsfati, & Cappella, 2005; Strömbäck et al, 2020; Kazun, 2023; Bodrunova, & Nepiyushchikh, 2024). Thus, it has already been proven that the dissemination of clips with traumatic content on social media significantly exacerbates post-traumatic stress in the audience (Abdalla et al, 2021). Naturally, successful dissemination of such clips is possible only under conditions of trust established in relation to the sources of such content.

At the same time, the current level of development of online platforms implies the formation of a number of new practices and modes of media consumption, some of which resemble those that were common earlier, such as background media consumption (Kulchitskaya, & Filatkina, 2021; Baychik, 2023; Anisimov et al, 2023), and some of which apparently have no analogues in the past, such as video preview modes, fast scrolling of textual content, etc. (Dunas, 2019). To understand the specifics of the use of these practices, the context of media consumption is extremely important – that is, in what physical conditions the media text is consumed (first of all, we are talking about the location of the act of media consumption), as well as with what motivation and in what physical and psychological state it takes place. It seems that in different contexts, the effects and, consequently, the psychological consequences of media consumption will be different.

Thus, this article is primarily aimed at exploring those areas that have remained previously understudied. First, the authors aim to identify the psychological effects that occur immediately after the act of consuming a unit of content with potentially traumatic content, which will allow us to further define more precisely the characteristics of media texts that directly influence the formation of a particular psychological state. Second, this work is based on the use of stimulus material that is not related to current events, i.e. the type that cannot be attributed to classic news content, but whose presence in

the array of daily consumed media texts is quite high (it should be noted that daily news consumption is almost always significantly less time-consuming than the consumption of entertainment content (Dunas et al, 2023)). Finally, the authors decided to slightly change the traditional context for this type of research – to replace spontaneous content consumption, which is carried out on the basis of an independent decision, with media consumption “forced” – that which a member of the audience performs at the request or necessity. After all, as a number of recent studies show, media consumption is not always linearly related to trust or positive evaluation of the quality of the information source (Segado-Boj, & Said-Hung, 2022; Flynn, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2017). In this case, the content reaches the consumer despite the fact that de facto the consumer does not want it to.

Methodology and research design

In accordance with the tasks described above, the authors chose an uncontrolled experiment as a research method. Its participants were undergraduate students in the humanities (Faculty of Journalism, Lomonosov Moscow State University). The materials of the experiment were distributed to all 3rd and 4th year students at the end of September 2024 through specialized groups on online platforms and mass mailings with the help of representatives of the faculty administration. The total number of those who took part in the experiment was 138, the age of the participants ranged from 18 to 24 years old (50% were 20-year-olds, 23% were 19-year-olds, 21% were 21-year-olds, and 6% were others). The bulk of the respondents were female (88%).

Technically, the experiment was designed as a Google Forms-based online survey using stimulus materials. Participants were divided into three commensurate groups. Group N1 (47 people) received a link to the survey without the use of stimulus material, thus becoming the control group – no potentially traumatizing content was consumed as part of the experiment. Group N2 (42 people) before taking the survey was asked to read the text and view a photo gallery related to the tragic event – the terrorist attack on Pushkin Square in Moscow, which took place in 2003 and killed 13 people (118 people were injured)³. Group N3 (49 people) had to watch a two-minute video clip dedicated to the above-mentioned event before taking the survey⁴. In both cases,

³ A terrorist attack on Pushkin Square in Moscow. Text and photo gallery. URL: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4443489#id1931170>

⁴ A terrorist attack on Pushkin Square in Moscow. URL: https://vk.com/video-35068738_456263781

the content offered for viewing could be classified as traumatizing (participants from groups 2-3 were warned about it before viewing).

It should be separately noted that, despite the tragic nature of the event represented in the stimulus materials, for the participants of the experiment it was extremely remote in time – most of them were not even born at the time of the terrorist attack. The location of the terrorist attack was relatively not distant from the place of their training – the distance to it was about 1 km, which allows us to speak about the geographical proximity of the event.

The survey was based on the classic tools of psychological diagnostics – the Spielberger-Hanin situational anxiety scale⁵, as well as the CES-D questionnaire⁶ to identify depression. Each respondent had to answer 40 questions – 20 to identify situational anxiety and 20 concerning possible depressive manifestations.

This experiment was aimed primarily at identifying current levels of anxiety in the control group and in the two groups that consumed traumatic content immediately prior to taking the surveys. Additionally, levels of depression were measured (although the epistemological value of these data is lower because of the different characteristics of depression as a state – primarily its relatively long genesis). These psychological conditions have been previously studied in the context of media consumption, although no comprehensive conclusions have been drawn about the mechanisms and strength of the negative psychological impact of media consumption (Pfefferbaum, Nitiéma, & Newman, 2020).

Results

As noted above, the first half of the questions offered to the participants of the experiment was aimed at identifying situational anxiety. And the results turned out to be somewhat unexpected (see *Tables 1, 1a*). In particular, of the three groups, only Group N2, which consumed photographic content (with the addition of a small amount of textual content), showed a sharp spike in situational anxiety. Group N3, which consumed video content, which is considered the most traumatizing in the literature, showed almost the same results as the control group, which did not consume any content at all in the experiment.

⁵ The Spielberger-Hanin situational anxiety scale is an informative way of self-assessment of the level of anxiety at the moment (reactive anxiety). It allows assessing not only the level of the subject's current anxiety, but also determining whether he/she is under the influence of a stressful situation and what is the intensity of this influence on him/her

⁶ The CES-D (Center of Epidemiological Studies – Depression) Depression Questionnaire is designed to screen for depressive disorder in adults and adolescents.

Table 1

The level of situational anxiety in respondents, %

Situational anxiety	Group N1	Group N2	Group N3
High level	49	79	43
Moderate level	47	19	51
Low level	4	2	6

Table 1a

The level of situational anxiety in respondents (descriptive statistics), scores⁷

Situational anxiety	Group N1	Group N2	Group N3
Average	46	51	44
Median	44	50	44
Standard deviation	9	8	8

All three groups recorded a rather similar level of low anxiety (2-6% depending on the group). However, if we consider other levels (moderate and high), a striking difference between Group N2 and the other two groups is obvious (see *Table 1*). Thus, 79% of respondents from this group fell into the zone of high anxiety (49% and 43% in Groups N1 and N3, respectively). The differences between Group N2 and the other two groups are even more noticeable when analyzing descriptive statistics (see *Table 1a*). Thus, with a median of 44 points in Groups N1 and N3 (the upper boundary of the moderate anxiety level), Group N2 demonstrates a level of 50 points, which unambiguously corresponds to the level of high situational anxiety.

The second half of the questions asked to respondents was aimed at measuring the level of depression (see *Tables 2, 2a*). As expected based on the nature of this psychological state, the results compared to situational anxiety turned out to be less indicative. Thus, Group N2 is also characterized by an increased level of depression compared to both Group N1 and Group N3, but there is a higher dispersion of results (see the standard deviation values in *Table 2a*). As a result, these results are difficult to interpret unambiguously – the differences of control Group N1 from both Group N2 and Group N3 individually were also notable (at least within the scope of this experiment). Thus, the number of respondents with a heavy form of depression amounted to 15% in Group N1, 26% in Group N2 and 2% in Group N3. In Group N1, 43% of respondents corresponded to

⁷ The index up to 30 points corresponds to a low level of situational anxiety, 31-44 – moderate, 45 and more – high.

the concept of “norm”, in Group N2 – 31%, and in the last, third group, this indicator was the highest – 53%.

Table 2

Depression	Group N1	Group N2	Group N3
Heavy	15	26	2
Moderate	8	7	10
Light	34	36	35
Normal	43	31	53

Table 2a

Depression	Group N1	Group N2	Group N3
Average	20	23	17
Median	19	22	17
Standard deviation	10	10	7

Discussion and conclusion

The study of the level of situational anxiety and depression showed that there is a correlation between the consumption of traumatic content and negative psychological consequences. Nevertheless, this dependence is not linear and, obviously, depends on many factors, previously not taken into account by scientists or insufficiently taken into account.

Thus, the demonstration of static photographic content of traumatic nature, combined with a small amount of relevant text (Group N2), definitely “worked” – the level of situational anxiety in the participants of the experiment immediately and quite significantly increased (it is difficult to say anything definite about depression – its increased level may have been determined by the “incoming” characteristics of the group).

The results of testing of Group N3 posed more questions than answers. This group of respondents was asked to watch a traumatic video clip before taking the survey. And, as it would be logical to assume, it was here that the researchers could expect both the highest concentration of situational anxiety level and – possibly – the presence of more severe forms of depression. The results turned out to be quite different – if the level of situational anxiety actually coincided

⁸ 0-17 points – normal; 18-26 points – light depression; 27-30 points – moderate depression; 31 points and above – heavy depression.

with the indicators of the control group, depressive states were even lower in prevalence. This partly contradicts the findings of previous studies (see e.g. Abdalla et al, 2021; Pfefferbaum, Nitiéma, & Newman, 2019, etc.) and raises questions, first, about the influence of the format and type of content on its perception; second, about the technical conditions of the media consumption process.

The authors of the article suggest that the nature of exposure to traumatic content is highly complex and requires consideration of at least several additional factors previously underestimated by scientists:

1) Source of traumatizing content and trust in it. In this case, there was clearly no commitment to it – the experiment can be compared to receiving some content from unfamiliar media, the attitude to which is not formed;

2) Nature of content consumption – since in our case the experiment was not controlled, its participants could choose where and how they would view the proposed stimulus materials. Recall that before taking the survey, respondents from Group N2 were asked to view a photo gallery and read small texts about the terrorist attack on Pushkin Square in Moscow in 2003. It is likely that the technical ease and high speed of consumption of this content may have influenced the results obtained. Group N3, on the other hand, was offered a two-minute video, which requires a longer viewing time - it is quite possible that the participants limited themselves to a cursory viewing (preview) with the sound turned off, which, of course, reduced its “effectiveness” due to the elimination of the accompanying audio narration, which enhances the impact of the video;

3) Relevance of the event – the nature of the content and the specifics of the “audience” involved in the experiment did not contribute to the formation of a sense of direct involvement in the traumatic event. For all groups, the terrorist attack on Pushkin Square in Moscow is an event of the distant past; respondents may know about it from recent history textbooks, stories of older relatives, as well as from archival publications in the media and those made for the next anniversary. In other words, such content may not have aroused any lively interest and engagement.

Thus, we assume that the traumatic impact of content on the audience depends very much on the context – the source of information, the availability of time and the desire to consume this particular content, the physical conditions of media consumption, the technical characteristics and software of the equipment, and the feeling of proximity to the images and events being

broadcast. In some cases, even content that is traditionally considered less “dangerous”, “traumogenic”, etc., may cause greater psychological damage to the audience (for example, viewing a small number of photos may have a radically greater impact than viewing a complex video that combines a whole complex of different types of content). It is also important to note the following: in special contexts, even media texts representing irrelevant events (e.g., long past or geographically distant) can have a very serious psychological impact on the audience – in particular, by creating a high level of anxiety, which, in addition to being uncomfortable for a person, can in some cases aggravate manifestations of more serious psychological conditions.

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Data on individual respondents of Group N1

Respondent	Gender	Situational anxiety	Depression
Respondent 1	Female	51	40
Respondent 2	Male	34	47
Respondent 3	Male	58	31
Respondent 4	Female	48	29
Respondent 5	Female	51	42
Respondent 6	Male	39	34
Respondent 7	Female	31	27
Respondent 8	Female	62	25
Respondent 9	Female	41	34
Respondent 10	Female	30	30
Respondent 11	Female	41	18
Respondent 12	Female	42	20
Respondent 13	Female	46	34
Respondent 14	Female	53	26
Respondent 15	Female	67	18
Respondent 16	Female	52	19
Respondent 17	Female	34	23
Respondent 18	Female	44	21
Respondent 19	Male	38	26
Respondent 20	Female	40	24
Respondent 21	Female	56	24
Respondent 22	Female	56	15
Respondent 23	Female	55	23
Respondent 24	Female	48	15
Respondent 25	Female	56	18
Respondent 26	Female	47	20
Respondent 27	Female	42	19
Respondent 28	Female	49	27
Respondent 29	Female	42	14
Respondent 30	Female	69	10
Respondent 31	Male	39	14

Respondent 32	Female	39	20
Respondent 33	Female	40	12
Respondent 34	Female	58	16
Respondent 35	Female	43	13
Respondent 36	Female	61	13
Respondent 37	Female	47	14
Respondent 38	Female	41	11
Respondent 39	Male	49	9
Respondent 40	Female	34	10
Respondent 41	Female	44	8
Respondent 42	Female	54	16
Respondent 43	Female	43	13
Respondent 44	Female	43	11
Respondent 45	Female	47	4
Respondent 46	Female	28	5
Respondent 47	Female	42	3

Table 4

Data on individual respondents of Group N2

Respondent	Gender	Situational anxiety	Depression
Respondent 1	Female	42	13
Respondent 2	Female	38	19
Respondent 3	Female	51	25
Respondent 4	Female	59	39
Respondent 5	Female	46	17
Respondent 6	Female	59	29
Respondent 7	Female	49	26
Respondent 8	Female	41	11
Respondent 9	Female	44	13
Respondent 10	Female	55	34
Respondent 11	Female	49	10
Respondent 12	Female	63	40
Respondent 13	Female	55	19
Respondent 14	Female	55	34
Respondent 15	Female	53	22
Respondent 16	Female	44	7
Respondent 17	Female	52	22

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Respondent 18	Male	63	42
Respondent 19	Female	45	14
Respondent 20	Female	46	21
Respondent 21	Male	49	21
Respondent 22	Male	64	36
Respondent 23	Female	51	29
Respondent 24	Female	51	18
Respondent 25	Male	48	21
Respondent 26	Female	44	23
Respondent 27	Female	50	13
Respondent 28	Female	56	30
Respondent 29	Female	43	15
Respondent 30	Male	51	32
Respondent 31	Female	46	20
Respondent 32	Female	50	19
Respondent 33	Female	50	26
Respondent 34	Female	58	35
Respondent 35	Female	67	40
Respondent 36	Female	48	17
Respondent 37	Female	41	11
Respondent 38	Female	30	6
Respondent 39	Female	53	23
Respondent 40	Female	59	33
Respondent 41	Female	59	33
Respondent 42	Female	47	13

Table 5

Data on individual respondents of Group N3

Respondent	Gender	Situational anxiety	Depression
Respondent 1	Female	37	17
Respondent 2	Female	52	25
Respondent 3	Female	44	23
Respondent 4	Female	48	39
Respondent 5	Female	59	27
Respondent 6	Male	25	27
Respondent 7	Female	49	28

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Respondent 8	Female	49	26
Respondent 9	Female	44	21
Respondent 10	Female	52	24
Respondent 11	Female	43	9
Respondent 12	Female	50	10
Respondent 13	Female	38	11
Respondent 14	Male	53	8
Respondent 15	Female	46	10
Respondent 16	Female	44	13
Respondent 17	Female	44	17
Respondent 18	Female	44	21
Respondent 19	Female	52	18
Respondent 20	Female	37	24
Respondent 21	Female	36	15
Respondent 22	Female	53	15
Respondent 23	Female	45	18
Respondent 24	Female	32	13
Respondent 25	Male	37	23
Respondent 26	Male	39	26
Respondent 27	Male	39	19
Respondent 28	Female	43	26
Respondent 29	Female	35	13
Respondent 30	Female	29	11
Respondent 31	Female	56	18
Respondent 32	Female	56	18
Respondent 33	Female	59	10
Respondent 34	Female	55	17
Respondent 35	Female	34	15
Respondent 36	Female	41	12
Respondent 37	Female	41	23
Respondent 38	Female	33	14
Respondent 39	Female	43	11
Respondent 40	Male	43	28
Respondent 41	Female	49	9
Respondent 42	Female	33	4
Respondent 43	Female	46	3

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Respondent 44	Female	51	23
Respondent 45	Female	54	14
Respondent 46	Female	34	11
Respondent 47	Female	28	13
Respondent 48	Female	45	7
Respondent 49	Female	38	27