

**THEORIZING CRIMINALITY  
AND POLICING IN THE  
DIGITAL MEDIA AGE**

# STUDIES IN MEDIA AND COMMUNICATIONS

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STUDIES IN MEDIA AND  
COMMUNICATIONS VOLUME 20

# THEORIZING CRIMINALITY AND POLICING IN THE DIGITAL MEDIA AGE

EDITED BY

**JULIE B. WIEST**

*West Chester University of Pennsylvania, USA*

Sponsored by the ASA Section on Communication,  
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# CONTENTS

<i>List of Tables and Figures</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>List of Contributors</i>	<i>xi</i>
<i>About the Authors</i>	<i>xiii</i>
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>xvii</i>
<b>Editor's Introduction</b>	
<i>Julie B. Wiest</i>	<i>xix</i>

## SECTION I NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR CRIMINALS AND POLICE

<b>Chapter 1 Does Exposure Matter? Media, Education, and Experience Affecting Technology-Mediated Abuse Knowledge, Understanding, and Severity-Perceptions</b>	
<i>Jessica J. Eckstein and Ruth Quattro</i>	<i>3</i>
<b>Chapter 2 Dealing with Deepfakes: Reddit, Online Content Moderation, and Situational Crime Prevention</b>	
<i>Kristjan Kikerpill, Andra Siibak and Suido Valli</i>	<i>25</i>
<b>Chapter 3 Attaining Security Through Algorithms: Perspectives of Refugees and Data Experts</b>	
<i>Tayfun Kasapoglu and Anu Masso</i>	<i>47</i>

## SECTION II DIGITAL MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF CRIMINALITY AND POLICING

<b>Chapter 4 Dramatization of the @Gangsta: Instagram Cred in the Age of Glocalized Gang Culture</b>	
<i>Nicola Bozzi</i>	<i>69</i>

<b>Chapter 5</b>	<b>Perp Walks as Contested Rituals: Documents, Affordances, and Performances</b>	
	<i>Mary Angela Bock</i>	89

<b>Chapter 6</b>	<b>Images of Crime: Empathetic Newsworthiness and Digital Technologies in the Production of Police News on Television in Argentina</b>	
	<i>Mercedes Calzado and Vanesa Lio</i>	109

### SECTION III STUDYING CRIMINALITY AND POLICING IN THE DIGITAL MEDIA AGE

<b>Chapter 7</b>	<b>“Every Day When I Go to Work, I Wonder If It Will Be the Day I Die”: Sensemaking Mass Media and School Shootings</b>	
	<i>Amy R. May and Victoria McDermott</i>	131

<b>Chapter 8</b>	<b>Lost in the Mediascape: Embracing Uncertainties and Contradictions at the Cultural Nexus of Crime and Media</b>	
	<i>Nickie D. Phillips and Nicholas Chagnon</i>	151

<b>Chapter 9</b>	<b>Five Things That Went Wrong with Media Violence Research</b>	
	<i>Tom Grimes and Stephanie Dailey</i>	169

	<i>Index</i>	189
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# LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

<b>Table 1.1</b>	TMA Knowledge Predicted by Amount and Source-type of Exposure.	12
<b>Table 1.2</b>	Bivariate Relations Among TMA Exposure Types, Understanding, and Knowledge.	15
<b>Table 1.3</b>	Exposure-type Differences in Perceptions of TMA Tactics Understood as a “Worst Experience.”	18
<b>Table 2.1</b>	Situational Crime Prevention Techniques for Online Content Moderation and Platform Policy Enforcement.	32
<b>Table 3.1</b>	Main Themes and Code Examples.	56
<b>Fig. 5.1</b>	Visual Journalists Assemble to Await the Arrival of Bill Cosby for a Hearing at the Montgomery County Courthouse in Norristown, Penn., in 2017, with Some Making Use of Vertical Space with Step Ladders. (Photo by Mary Angela Bock).	96
<b>Fig. 5.2</b>	Photographers are Poised to Document the Arrival of Jerry Sandusky (Emerging from the Car at the Upper Right) During His 2012 Trial in Bellefonte, Penn. Because a Temporary Awning at the Courthouse Door Shielded Sandusky as He Entered, Visual Journalists Had Only Approximately Eight Seconds to Capture His Perp Walk. (Photo by Mary Angela Bock).	99

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**Nickie D. Phillips**, St. Francis College, Brooklyn, USA, is author of *Beyond Blurred Lines: Rape Culture in Popular Media* (Rowman & Littlefield) and co-author of *Comic Book Crime: Truth, Justice, and the American Way* (NYUPress). She has published work on media, crime, and popular culture in journals such as *Feminist Criminology*, *Feminist Media Studies*, and the *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*.

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The idea for a volume on media and crime arose from the success of a plenary panel that I organized and moderated for the 2019 Media Sociology Preconference, titled "Media Representations of Crime: Constructing Culture and Shaping Social Life." The topic drew so much interest, in fact, that Emerald approved an additional volume on a related topic that follows this one in the series (and I still had to turn down many promising proposals!). Thanks again to the preconference panelists – one of whom co-authored a chapter in this volume – for sharing their expertise in the broad field of media and crime: Valerie J. Callanan (Kent State University), Venessa Garcia (New Jersey City University), Lisa A. Kort-Butler (University of Nebraska – Lincoln), Nickie Phillips (St Francis College), and Alicia Simmons (Colgate University). And a big thank you to Casey Brienza and her organizing committee for all their hard work, and to Kenneth Kambara for hosting the preconference.

Lastly, thank you to the scholars who generously gave hours of their time to review the scholarship in this volume and offer thoughtful comments and suggestions that greatly enhanced the quality of every chapter; to *Emerald Studies in Media and Communications* Series Editors Laura Robinson, Shelia Cotten, and Jeremy Schulz for their support and dedication to producing high-quality scholarship in media and communication studies; and to the members of Emerald's production team who helped me navigate this project amid a global pandemic, especially Jen McCall, Dheebika Veerasamy, Carys Morley, and Harriet Notman.

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# EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

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Criminality, policing, and mass media are enduring topics in studies of the social world, and scholarly advances in these areas are particularly pertinent in times of social and cultural change. The digital revolution that began in post-industrial societies has affected, to varying extents, most nations around the world, introducing new opportunities for both crime commission and crime control, transforming social structures and institutions, and inspiring novel considerations for scholarly inquiry. Each chapter in this volume offers empirically supported investigations and insights into the evolving landscape of criminality and policing in the digital media age. Scholars address emerging patterns and practices such as technology-mediated violence, digitally altered pornography and its consequences, and algorithm-supported methods of law enforcement; representations of crime, criminals, and police on social media and via digital productions of traditional media; and methodological considerations for studying crime and media in a changing world.

## *New Opportunities for Criminals and Police*

Digital technologies have advanced and spread faster than any other innovation in human history. It took only about two decades for approximately half of the population in developing nations to gain access ([UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel, 2019](#)), while a mere fraction of those in the most-advanced economies now lack access ([Schumacher & Kent, 2020](#)). With rapid advancements that continually improve the capabilities, ease of use, and costs of these technologies, the point of user saturation surely is at hand. Although some experts continue to emphasize the inequalities related to persistent domestic and global digital divides ([Poushter, 2017](#); [Robinson et al., 2020a, 2020b](#)), others suggest that opportunities for greater equality ultimately outweigh the potential drawbacks ([UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel, 2019](#)). Whatever the eventual outcome, widespread access to digital technologies has created new opportunities for both criminality and policing. Crimes committed via digital technologies – frequently referred to as cybercrimes – continue to increase year over year and result in soaring financial losses worldwide ([Anderson et al., 2019](#)). Common types include identity theft, financial fraud (including cryptocurrency-exchange hacking), travel fraud, and ransomware ([Anderson et al., 2019](#); [Gorham, 2020](#)).

The initial chapters in this volume examine some lesser-known types of cyber-crime. In the first chapter, "Does Exposure Matter? Media, Education, and Experience Affecting Technology-Mediated Abuse Knowledge, Understanding, and Severity-Perceptions," Jessica J. Eckstein and Ruth Quattro advance scholarship on digitally facilitated violence. Their study takes an in-depth look at technology-mediated abuse (TMA) and examines the ways in which exposure to different types of education and media about TMA, as well as personal experiences with it, shape related public knowledge, understanding, and perceptions. Then, in "Dealing with Deepfakes: Reddit, Online Content Moderation, and Situational Crime Prevention," Kristjan Kikerpill, Andra Siibak, and Suido Valli present a fascinating study of deepfakes (i.e., the replacement of one person's image in existing – often pornographic – media content with the likeness of another) for which they applied the situational crime prevention framework to examine members' responses when their online community decided to ban such content.

Within policing, data-mining techniques and artificial-intelligence systems are being used to detect, solve, and even predict crime (Brayne, 2017; Hassani, Huang, Silva, & Ghodsi, 2016). This includes software for assessing recidivism risk and uncovering crime patterns, as well as automated video surveillance with facial recognition and listening devices (e.g., for detecting gunshots in urban spaces; see Merrill, 2017). Adding to this cutting-edge scholarship, Tayfun Kasapoglu and Anu Masso's chapter, "Attaining Security Through Algorithms: Perspectives of Refugees and Data Experts," offers a fascinating look at how police risk-scoring algorithms are perceived by data experts and refugees in Estonia and Turkey, while exposing some of the ways in which digital technologies are used to make highly consequential decisions.

### *Digital Media Representations of Criminality and Policing*

Media representation has long comprised a significant amount of social science scholarship. Scholars have examined the ways in which a wide array of groups and topics has been portrayed in news and entertainment media, with some theorizing about the potential consequences. Yet, the digital media age has significantly increased opportunities for producing and distributing media content – by professionals and amateurs, alike – and, thus, allows for substantial shifts in what may be portrayed and how. In Chapter 4, "Dramatization of the @Gangsta: Instagram Cred in the Age of Glocalised Gang Culture," Nicola Bozzi uses the cultural trope of the "Gangsta" to demonstrate the ways in which criminals are portrayed, even dramatized, on social media and within a broader cultural context that is intertwined with the digital media realm.

Chapters 5 and 6 feature studies that are perhaps more traditionally aligned with media representation scholarship, yet each centers its thesis solidly in a digital environment. In "Perp Walks as Contested Rituals: Documents, Affordances, and Performances," Mary Angela Bock examines the variety of meanings that frame perp walks and how the subjective perspectives of defendants, visual journalists, and members of law enforcement all contribute to understandings

of media ritual and embodied practice. In “Images of Crime: Empathetic Newsworthiness and Digital Technologies in the Production of Police News on Television in Argentina,” Mercedes Calzado and Vanesa Lio guide readers through an examination of new modes for producing and presenting television crime news in Argentina, revealing the transformative impact of the spread of digital technologies as information sources.

### *Studying Criminality and Policing in the Digital Media Age*

Alongside changes to crime commission, policing, and the production, distribution, and influence of media content in the digital age, the practices and procedures used to scientifically understand these changes also are adapting. Although many digital media researchers previously enjoyed ready access to digital data via Application Programming Interfaces (APIs), changes to the landscape in recent years are posing new challenges (see Perriam, 2020). The last three chapters in this volume lend novel insights for media and crime scholars who are working to forge a path forward. In “‘Every Day When I Go to Work, I Wonder If It Will Be the Day I Die’: Sensemaking Mass Media and School Shootings,” Victoria McDermott and Amy May examine a sensitive and personal topic in crime and media – how educators make sense of their experiences related to the threat of school shootings – by using an unobtrusive digital method that may serve as a model for future research focusing on sensitive topics and/or vulnerable populations.

Chapters 8 and 9 focus more specifically on methodology and include clear, practical conclusions that surely will influence crime and media scholarship well into the future. In “Lost in the Mediascape: Embracing Uncertainties and Contradictions at the Cultural Nexus of Crime and Media,” Nickie D. Phillips and Nicholas Chagnon explain methodological crises in criminology scholarship but also offer tools for researchers who seek better wayfinding in this new and dynamic landscape. Concluding the volume with “Five Things That Went Wrong with Media Violence Research,” Tom Grimes and Stephanie Dailey draw on decades of research to identify and explain in remarkable detail five methodological errors frequently made by researchers of media violence and behavioral aggression, as well as to outline ways for social media researchers to avoid making the same mistakes.

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# SECTION I

## NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR CRIMINALS AND POLICE

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# CHAPTER 1

## DOES EXPOSURE MATTER? MEDIA, EDUCATION, AND EXPERIENCE AFFECTING TECHNOLOGY-MEDIATED ABUSE KNOWLEDGE, UNDERSTANDING, AND SEVERITY-PERCEPTIONS

Jessica J. Eckstein and Ruth Quattro

### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** *This study explored technology-mediated abuse (TMA) by looking at the influence of topic exposure via education (informal), media (nonfictional), and personal experiences (self/close others) in shaping public knowledge, understandings, and perceptions of TMA.*

**Methodology:** *Community-sampled respondents ( $N = 551$ ;  $n = 235$  men, 263 women; aged 18–81 years,  $M = 27.42$ ,  $SD = 12.31$ ) reported their TMA awareness and topic exposure ( $n = 110$ ; 20% of the total sample indicated prior exposure).*

**Findings:** *Results indicated TMA knowledge, understanding, and perceptions varied by prior sources of topic exposure. This suggests that TMA is a crime varying in public awareness and perceived repercussions.*

**Research limitations:** *Open-ended responses, although ideal for exploratory studies such as this one, limit the scope and power of quantitative analyses.*

*Future work should test the current study's conclusions in a generalizable, random sample via closed-item surveys.*

**Originality/value:** *Present findings elucidate which societal forces and education types are best suited for helping people understand TMA in all its complexity. Such understanding allows for practical considerations of the comparative ineffectiveness of formal curriculum and media in shaping cognitions regarding TMA victimization.*

**Keywords:** Computer-mediated communication; entertainment education; intimate partner violence; partner violence; primary prevention curriculum; public awareness

More than 112 million people will experience severe psychological aggression from a romantic partner in their lifetime (Black et al., 2011), with partner-perpetrated physical assault, rape, and/or stalking experienced at least once in the lifetimes of over 42.4 million women (35.6% of females) and 32.2 million men (28.5% of males) in the United States (US). Increasingly, technology is harnessed (both legally and illegally) by perpetrators to control, harass, stalk, and violate romantic partners – a phenomenon known as *technology-mediated abuse* (TMA). Because societal treatment of this crime exacerbates victims' stigma, reducing their support and/or coping resources, it is imperative to study public perceptions and/or knowledge regarding the topic. Doing so can increase the efficacy/availability of victim resources and hone the legal status of TMA. Many domestic violence behaviors are criminal, but many others (particularly those that are digitally perpetrated) remain lawful (Commander, 2018). Thus, policy adaptations to evolving technologies depend on public understandings (Palazzolo & Roberto, 2011). Research shows popular TMA-perceptions are influenced by media coverage, education, and/or personal experiences (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2014), making these three potential information sources essential for study.

Considering this social change potential (i.e., to affect criminal policies regarding TMA victims), we examined which/how exposure sources influence public TMA-comprehension in terms of participants' TMA knowledge, understanding, and perceptions of severity. To frame this study, we first consider what is known regarding TMA and how people's impressions of it may be affected by their exposures to media (fictional and nonfiction), education (formal and informal), and personal experiences (self and close-others). We conclude by discussing results of a self-report study of these factors.

## TECHNOLOGY-MEDIATED ABUSE (TMA)

The technological boom has been a boon for victims' help-seeking (Finn & Banach, 2000), but its criminal, relational uses remain victims' bane. Given the extent, forms, and nature of digitally perpetrated abuse, TMA is more than just a

tool or mediator of abuse/rs (see [Eckstein, 2020](#)). It is both uniquely complex and distinctively shaped by societal norms.

### *TMA's Complexity*

*Intimate partner violence* describes relationships in which verbal, psychological, or physical abuse; coercive control; and/or intrusive tactics are used to dominate, scare, and/or harm romantic partners. Technologies have long been used to perpetrate stalking or invasion (e.g., calling incessantly or audio/video bugging) and perpetuate fear and control. However, in the last few decades, exponentially increasing usability/access and decreasing costs have allowed its use in ways not previously imagined (e.g., location services, geotagging, and remote home management).

Abuse occurs in varied forms via many technologies. One commonly studied violation is *cyberstalking*, generally known as technology-facilitated, unwelcome, persistent, psychologically abusive behaviors of which victims are aware. Outside digital arenas, “stalking” implies being somewhat removed from the surveilled party; when facilitated online, it achieves goals previously necessitating perpetrators’ presence. Because “cyberstalking” references both relational partners and strangers (groups with differing dynamics) and does not account for technology used to abuse in other ways (i.e., beyond stalking tactics), we focus on the broader TMA concept, which includes surveillance, emotional attack, and/or intrusion and more/less invasive/direct abuse methods typical in intimate relationships (see [Eckstein, 2020](#)).

TMA tactics are certainly used against strangers or acquaintances, but we focus on romantic contexts as unique, with dynamic, historically shared experiences involving commitments and distinct patterns/norms/rules guiding them ([Stafford & Canary, 2006](#)). As such, TMA used in abusive romantic relationships may extend in-person abuse methods *and/or* injure or control partners in ways not possible with technology used to harm strangers/acquaintances. With TMA, one tool serves multiple purposes (e.g., attack, control, monitor) with overlapping victim outcomes (e.g., fear, coercion, anxiety), all dependent on the unique relational history of that dyad ([Eckstein, 2020](#)). However, not everyone understands TMA similarly ([Davies, 2019](#)).

People perceive digital behaviors differently depending on the relationship’s type, status, and members. [Burke, Wallen, Vail-Smith, and Knox \(2011\)](#) found that, regardless of their texting views while in a “healthy” relationship, young adults’ perceptions of texting (at the same frequency as before) changed when they broke up; the same repetitive messaging once considered acceptable was viewed as “cyberstalking” when relationships ended. The line between what is acceptable or intrusive is often unclear, but such sender/target “confusion” is particularly problematic when used to abuse (or even perceived that way). An identically worded “romantic” message can become “scary” the next day, for example, depending on what transpires.

Adding to victimization’s complexity is the stigma toward those who experience it. *Stigma* is constructed societally and alters people’s views of and reaction toward others ([Goffman, 1963](#)) by producing in/out groups, the latter risking

social repercussions like ostracization, shame, and resource exclusion (Phelan, Link, & Dovidio, 2008). How people think about a topic – particularly one as fraught as criminal intimate behavior – in/directly shapes those stigmatized. Education is believed to reduce stigma, but that only works if prejudicial beliefs/practices are not further perpetuated (Kang & Inzlicht, 2012). This means that to address a problem – whether through heightened awareness, legal repercussions, or social support – public awareness of the issue first must be understood.

### *Public Cognitions on Complex Topics*

Beyond its potential to facilitate harm, technology itself also reflexively shapes society's view of it. Media used in formal, education settings and informal, entertainment contexts influence people's impressions of romantic relationships (Kretz, 2019), sex and gender norms (Hust et al., 2017), and norms for healthy interpersonal behaviors (Galloway, Engstrom, & Emmers-Sommer, 2015; Lippman, 2015). What is unknown are the comparative influences of different exposure sources on topic understanding. Knowing how people perceive TMA is a crucial step toward addressing the problem.

There are many ways to conceptualize comprehension. To capture nuance in people's familiarity with a topic, we differentiate knowledge from understanding. *Knowledge* is concept awareness; people's ability to label an occurrence is indicative of one knowledge type (Rosch, 1978), and knowledge is illustrated by amount, specificity, and variety (breadth) of communication. *Understanding* refers to connections among underlying concepts that make up a construct (Assilamehou & Teste, 2012). When knowledge categorization interacts with personal perceptions (i.e., connotative meanings), it leads to nuanced cognitions producing understanding (Kelly, 1955). Whereas knowledge is largely knowing something exists and being able to identify cases of it, understanding goes critically deeper to forge associations, contexts, and potential outcomes or applications of a concept (Bannister & Mair, 1968).

Both knowledge and understanding are affected by prior exposures. For example, Oliver, Sargent, and Weaver (1998) showed that those exposed to gender-specific environments early on who then viewed TV violence were desensitized, with lowered ability to identify partner violence. Someone may identify (i.e., have knowledge of) TMA as a crime, but where TMA is culturally normalized, public understandings and perceptions of its deviance may be affected. In other words, we must ascertain not just *if* people know about something, but also *what* they know about it.

Noted previously, TMA is still not fully explored – let alone understood – by professional practitioners and researchers, so laic understandings vary. It seems unrealistic to expect the public to properly deal with an issue in the face of nonexistent, inaccessible, contradicting, and/or blatantly wrong information. Nor would it be appropriate to assign causality of perceptions *to* the public *if*/when they receive their information from particular sources. Because the extent of TMA topic exposure is unknown, we first asked:

*RQ1:* What is the extent (and nature) of a US sample's TMA topic exposure?

### *Exposure Variety*

Three main exposure sources influence people in modern society: (a) education, including formal schooling and informal community programs; (b) media, including fictional and nonfiction forms; and (c) personal experience, including personal and friend/family victimizations.

#### *Formal Education*

Particularly at undergraduate (Fox & Cook, 2011) and earlier (Kang & Inzlicht, 2012) levels, education is believed to influence knowledge, and thus, understanding and perceptions. One assumption guiding many education programs is that more familiarity leads to less uncertainty (accompanied by negativity) felt about a topic (Corrigan & Penn, 1999); exposure lowers likelihood of negative reactions/perceptions caused by internalized fears of the unknown (Kang & Inzlicht, 2012). Further, familiarity (via receiver personalization) increases sympathetic views toward and salience of a topic (Stephens & George, 2009). This is why mental health professionals and community educators frequently employ outreach methods (e.g., intervention curricula and public health campaigns) that not only expose a problem, but that presumably educate about it as well (e.g., Kang & Inzlicht, 2012). However, it matters how and what people are exposed to, particularly with socially sensitive topics like abusive relationships.

*Primary prevention education* presumes that early knowledge and attitude formation later primes awareness and sensitivity toward behaviors otherwise “ingrained” unhealthily by parents, peers, or other members of society (Browne-Miller, 2012). Based on social learning theory (e.g., Bandura, 1977), primary prevention approaches rely on sources outside people’s typical “at risk” social networks to shape understandings. For example, in the case of violence, education may attenuate negative community or familial influences (Copp, Giordano, Longmore, & Manning, 2019), particularly when modeled on strengths-based (versus deficit-based) approaches to decreasing violence tolerance (Crooks, Jaffe, Dunlop, Kerry, & Exner-Cortens, 2019).

Despite practitioners’ current acceptance of this approach as a best practice, education’s effectiveness remains unconfirmed, particularly for violence prevention (Nation et al., 2003). For one thing, long-term changes in attitudes, beliefs, and/or behaviors are difficult to distinguish and measure. Also, varied programs across schools with diverse student bodies convolute potential direct effects of particular curricula (Halpern-Meekin, 2012). As Crooks et al. (2019) note, rigorous study of programs’ effects (particularly long term) is lacking, and this is difficult to remedy in many situations with limited funding and/or marginalized populations.

When dealing with violence, most practitioners, clinicians, policymakers, and law enforcers (e.g., police, lawyers, and judges) are primarily uneducated, tend to rely on cultural myths, or otherwise demonstrate bias (Ahrens, 2006; Amar, Strout, Simpson, Cardiello, & Beckford, 2014; Brubaker & Keegan, 2019; Venema, 2019) – a concerning trend, given that education’s influence depends on not just *if* but also *what* is being taught. Even with an ideal curriculum, content updates must constantly reflect current audience (e.g., youths) practices *and*

empirical research, which remains sparse and ever-evolving for TMA. Given that true social change emerges not only from mere awareness of an issue, but also complex understanding of it, we examined education's role in predicting TMA knowledge (i.e., basic exposure level), understanding (i.e., comprehension complexity), and severity perceptions as follows:

*H1:* Prior educational TMA exposure will increase TMA: (a) knowledge (i.e., example frequency, specificity, and breadth); (b) understanding (i.e., contextual and thematic complexities); and (c) severity perceptions (i.e., tactics rated most harmful).

A final concern for violence-prevention educators is that many programs are not implemented until early adolescence, largely because of beliefs that teens' romantic practices inform their adult relationships (Murphy, 2013; O'Leary & Smith-Slep, 2003) and/or that educators should avoid exposing children to violent/sexual ideas (Chappell & Maggard, 2010). As such, formative beliefs informing normative behaviors may already be established by the time students receive formal topical education (Crooks et al., 2019). This is one reason why many scholars prefer to focus on more-ubiquitous and early-reaching exposure forms.

### *Media Exposure*

A rich literature exists on media's role in shaping how/what people think. Media ubiquity is purported to affect, intentionally or not, people's knowledge, beliefs, and attitudinal behaviors – especially for impressionable youth (Bonomi, Eaton, Nemeth, & Gillum, 2017). The type versus amount of influence media has on users is still debated (e.g., agenda setting versus media effects theories; see Bryant & Zillman, 1986; McCombs, 2004). Regardless, the belief that it influences *something* remains so prevalent that media outlets receive frequent criticism related to social issues like the appropriateness of children's content and the ways in which in/accuracy of media portrayals may perpetuate negative stereotypes and unhealthy social norms (Kahlor & Eastin, 2011). Simultaneously, this aspect of media is harnessed for its potential power in more structured, educational ways.

Understanding that “dry,” obvious, or otherwise didactic education methods fail to reach people en masse, educators may employ subtle media infiltration via *entertainment education* (EE), which embeds factual content meant to challenge myths or raise awareness about issues into already-mainstream narrative-style media (Singhal & Rogers, 2004). EE has existed for a while, although its intentional usage and formal study are more recent. Although research on its success is mixed (Hoffman, Shensa, Wessel, Hoffman, & Primack, 2017), when not enacted in a “clunky” manner (e.g., by “posting cringe,” to use a recent expression), it may increase long-term awareness of particular health and interpersonal information (Hether, Huang, Beck, Murphy, & Valente, 2008; Hust et al., 2017).

Influence effectiveness varies by genre and media type (e.g., dramatized film/TV, comic books, magazines, etc.). Although increasingly overlapping, genres are generally distinguished as fictional (i.e., to entertain) or nonfiction (i.e., to inform). How and where users encounter material may affect how it influences