

## Investigating the experience of viewing extreme real-world violence online: naturalistic evidence from an online discussion forum

|               |  |
|---------------|--|
| Item Type     | Journal article  |
| Authors       | Stubbs, Joshua;Nicklin, Laura Louise;Wilsdon, Luke;Lloyd, Joanne   |
| Citation      | Stubbs, J., Nicklin, L., Wilsdon, L. & LLoyd, J. (2024) Investigating the experience of viewing extreme real-world violence online: naturalistic evidence from an online discussion forum, <i>New Media and Society</i> , 26(7), pp. 3876-3894 |
| DOI           | <a href="https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221108451">10.1177/14614448221108451</a>  |
| Publisher     | SAGE   |
| Journal       | <i>New Media and Society</i>   |
| Download date | 2026-05-20 19:48:14  |
| License       | <a href="https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/">https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/</a>  |
| Link to Item  | <a href="http://hdl.handle.net/2436/624805">http://hdl.handle.net/2436/624805</a>  |



**Investigating the experience of viewing extreme real-world violence online: naturalistic evidence from an online discussion forum**

|                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| Journal:         | <i>New Media and Society</i>  |
| Manuscript ID    | NMS-22-0159.R1  |
| Manuscript Type: | Original Manuscript   |
| Keywords:        | User-generated content, Extreme violence, Real-world violence, Social media, Psychological distress, Qualitative research methods   |
| Abstract:        | This study investigates the psychological impact of viewing user-generated content depicting extreme real-world violence. Eight threads were harvested from publicly accessible online discussion forums in which people discussed their experiences of witnessing real-world torture, maiming, or death online. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to systematically analyse these threads. The themes capture the contradictory ways in which people react to viewing extreme real-world violence online, with some finding it intensely distressing and others using it as a resource for psychological grounding or (perceived) strengthening. Based on this analysis, we highlight pathways that may lead to the cessation or continuation of viewing such content and argue that greater research on this seemingly common but under-studied experience is warranted. |
|                  |   |

SCHOLARONE™  
Manuscripts

1  
2  
3  
4 **Title:** Investigating the psychological impact of viewing extreme real-world violence online:  
5  
6  
7 naturalistic evidence from an online discussion forum  
8  
9

10 **Abstract:** This study investigates the psychological impact of viewing user-generated content  
11  
12 depicting extreme real-world violence. Eight threads were harvested from publicly accessible  
13  
14 online discussion forums in which people discussed their experiences of witnessing real-world  
15  
16 torture, maiming, or death online. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to systematically analyse  
17  
18 these threads. The themes capture the contradictory ways in which people react to viewing extreme  
19  
20 real-world violence online, with some finding it intensely distressing and others using it as a  
21  
22 resource for psychological grounding or (perceived) strengthening. Based on this analysis, we  
23  
24 highlight pathways that may lead to the cessation or continuation of viewing such content and  
25  
26 argue that greater research on this seemingly common but under-studied experience is warranted.  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36

37 **Keywords:** User-generated content; extreme violence; real-world violence; social media;  
38  
39 psychological distress; qualitative research methods  
40  
41  
42  
43

44 **Word count (inclusive of all text):** 7,872  
45  
46

47 **Funding:** This research was funded by an unrestricted gift from Facebook Foundational Integrity  
48  
49 Research 2021. The funder had no input into or control over the research process or findings. The  
50  
51 Authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

## Introduction

The number of people using the Internet increased from 2.3 to 4.9 billion between 2011 and 2021 (International Telecommunication Union, 2021), and viewing online content is now a widespread and increasingly popular leisure activity (Auxier and Anderson, 2021). The popularity of engaging with social media and user-generated content (UGC), in particular, has increased dramatically since the mid-2000s, especially among adolescents (Twenge, Martin and Spitzberg, 2019). UGC is defined as content, such as images or videos, that non-media professionals voluntarily deposit on online platforms, such as blogs, discussion forums, and social media (Krumm, Davies and Narayanaswami, 2008). For those with access to the Internet, UGC can be empowering because it can enable them to consume, share, and discuss content that is of interest or value to them. This can be particularly liberating for adolescents (Chassiakos et al., 2016), as well as those who belong to vulnerable or marginalised groups (e.g. Udwan, Leurs and Alencar, 2020). UGC can also be used to share potentially distressing material, which can be difficult to censor or attach minimum viewer-age requirements to due to its volume and plurality of modes (Colley and Moore, 2022). A particularly salient example of such material is UGC depicting real-world violence (Boyd and Swanson, 2016), which is sometimes referred to as 'antisocial media' (Wood, 2017: p. 169). How exposure to extreme variations of such content is experienced in an era of widespread access to the Internet, social media, and fictional violent content will be the focus of this article.

1  
2  
3           There has been a lot of research aimed at understanding the psychological impact of  
4  
5  
6 viewing fictional content depicting violence in a variety of media. Some studies have identified  
7  
8  
9 links between engagement with violent videogames and aggression (e.g. Bender, Plante and  
10  
11 Gentile, 2018), but other research has challenged the idea of a direct causal effect of exposure to  
12  
13  
14 violent content on aggressive behaviour (e.g. Dowsett and Jackson, 2019), even when encountered  
15  
16  
17 in immersive, virtual reality settings (Drummond et al., 2021). Despite considerable historical  
18  
19  
20 concern about violent videogames, longitudinal research conducted in Singapore has found that  
21  
22  
23 adolescents who play them do not experience poorer mental health than their counterparts  
24  
25  
26 (Ferguson and Wang, 2021), while cross-sectional research conducted in the USA has found that  
27  
28  
29 graduate-level healthcare students who play them experience fewer symptoms of anxiety and  
30  
31  
32 discomfort when placed in tense or urgent settings (Krause, Smyth and Jansen, 2020).

33  
34  
35           There are reasons to believe that the psychological impact of viewing content depicting  
36  
37  
38 fictional versus real-world violence is likely to be notably different. It is well-established that  
39  
40  
41 exposure to media coverage of real-world disasters and large-scale violence typically results in the  
42  
43  
44 onset or intensification of negative psychological outcomes, such as increased anxiety, at least  
45  
46  
47 transiently (Hopwood and Schutte, 2017). There is also evidence to suggest that exposure to media  
48  
49  
50 coverage of extreme real-world violence may have prolonged psychological consequences.  
51  
52  
53 Longitudinal research conducted with a nationally representative sample of adults in the USA, for  
54  
55  
56 example, found that following the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013, greater exposure to graphic  
57  
58  
59 (i.e. bloody) images of the victims was associated with more severe symptoms of acute stress after  
60

1  
2  
3 several weeks, as well as heightened symptoms of posttraumatic stress six months later (Holman  
4  
5  
6 et al., 2020). Moreover, it has also been found that people who find media coverage of extreme  
7  
8  
9 real-world violence most upsetting are more likely to subsequently consume it and, therefore,  
10  
11  
12 precipitate a potentially harmful cycle of psychological distress (Thompson et al., 2019). These  
13  
14  
15 findings suggest that those who are exposed to graphic images or videos of terrorist attacks or  
16  
17  
18 massacres – which have featured in the type of UGC explored in this article – may benefit from  
19  
20  
21 psychological support.

22  
23  
24 There is some evidence to suggest that viewing UGC depicting real-world violence may  
25  
26  
27 cause greater psychological distress than mainstream media coverage of it. Research conducted in  
28  
29  
30 Canada, for example, has found that the frequency with which journalists are exposed to  
31  
32  
33 uncensored UGC depicting real-world violence within the newsroom is a significant predictor of  
34  
35  
36 their symptoms of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress (Feinstein, Audet and Waknine,  
37  
38  
39 2014). This research is restricted to journalists within professional working environments rather  
40  
41  
42 than the wider population, limiting the transferability of the findings. It is also unclear whether  
43  
44  
45 viewing such content on one or a handful of occasions can cause psychological harm, especially in  
46  
47  
48 those who – unlike the journalists included in this research – are not anticipating it. Nevertheless,  
49  
50  
51 research conducted in the UK found that half of 19-36-years-olds surveyed in a convenience  
52  
53  
54 sample had received unsolicited UGC depicting real-world violence via social media platforms at  
55  
56  
57 least once, and that most agreed that it is both unamusing and distressing (Nicklin, Swain and  
58  
59  
60 Lloyd, 2020). This suggests that viewing even mild forms of UGC depicting real-world violence

1  
2  
3 may cause at least some degree of psychological distress, as the participants were provided a broad  
4  
5  
6 definition of such content (i.e. it did not need to be particularly extreme). Highlighting the potential  
7  
8  
9 for UGC depicting real-world violence to be particularly harmful to children and adolescents, in a  
10  
11  
12 briefing by the UK-based National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPSS), it  
13  
14  
15 was reported that several young people had contacted the support line Childline due to feeling  
16  
17  
18 extremely upset and distressed after being exposed to it (NSPCC, 2022).  
19  
20

21  
22 Some people view and disseminate UGC depicting real-world violence in the interests of  
23  
24 awareness-raising and political activism by sharing footage of animal cruelty, excessive police  
25  
26 violence, and war crimes, for example. These behaviours are generally predicated on the pursuit  
27  
28 of pro-social, self-transcendent goals, 'whereby looking mobilises action' (Tait, 2008: p. 105). Thus,  
29  
30 viewing content depicting real-world violence can function 'moral motivator' (Grizzard et al., 2017:  
31  
32 p. 778). Since the late-2000s, there have been several occasions in which UGC depicting real-world  
33  
34 violence has been disseminated in the interests of promoting social change and enabling citizen  
35  
36 journalism such as following the shooting of Oscar Grant by a police officer in 2009 in the USA,  
37  
38 when mobile phone-captured footage of the incident was deposited on YouTube before being  
39  
40 broadcast on several 'otherwise lax' mainstream media platforms (Anthony and Thomas, 2010: p.  
41  
42 1291). Additionally, UGC of George Floyd being murdered by a police officer in 2020 in the USA  
43  
44 was widely shared via social media, and contributed towards catalysing transnational protests aimed  
45  
46 at highlighting, and redressing, past and present racial injustices. Circulation of this UGC, which  
47  
48 was initially deposited on Facebook, also coincided with a significant increase in the number of  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 occasions on which the term 'racism' was searched for in English and other languages on the  
4  
5  
6 Internet in many countries (Barrie, 2020). Therefore, while viewing UGC depicting real-world  
7  
8 violence has the potential to cause psychological harm, it also has the potential to facilitate moral  
9  
10 reflection and political engagement. Reflecting these potentialities, it has been suggested that  
11  
12 people view UGC depicting real-world violence that is deemed to be inappropriate for mainstream  
13  
14 media platforms from four perspectives:  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20

21 ...an amoral gaze, whereby the suffering subject becomes a source of  
22  
23 stimulation and pleasure; a vulnerable gaze, where viewers experience  
24  
25 harm from graphic imagery; an entitled gaze, where viewers frame their  
26  
27 looking through anti-censorship discourses; and a responsive gaze,  
28  
29 whereby looking is a precedent to action (Tait, 2008, p: 100-1)  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35

36 This typology was ground-breaking at the time at which it was published because it moved the  
37  
38 positioning of those who view UGC depicting real-world violence beyond the framing of them as  
39  
40 depraved previewers of 'pornographies of violence' (Tait, 2008, p: 91), and acknowledged that  
41  
42 people consume, and react to, such content in a multiplicity of ways. Supporting the argument that  
43  
44 people view online content depicting real-world violence for a heterogeneous variety of reasons,  
45  
46  
47  
48 research conducted with a nationally representative sample of adults in the USA has found that  
49  
50 curiosity and a desire to gain information or verify authenticity were the among the most  
51  
52 commonly cited reasons for volitionally viewing terrorist beheadings (Redmond et al., 2019).  
53  
54  
55  
56 Furthermore, research conducted in Australia has found that people who view real-world street  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 fights, brawls, and bare-knuckle boxing on Facebook do so for a variety of reasons, such as because  
4  
5  
6 they find it intriguing, nostalgia-inducing, or validating of ‘violent codes of masculinity’ (Wood,  
7  
8  
9 2018: p. 39). Importantly, such codes regulate the forms of violence that are be considered to be  
10  
11 signifiers of masculinity by praising ‘clean fights’ and construing ‘deviant’ acts of violence, such as  
12  
13 attacking someone who is unconscious or unwilling to fight, as indicators of ‘failed masculinity’  
14  
15 (Wood, 2018: p. 37). These findings suggest that viewing UGC content depicting real-world  
16  
17 violence is a complex and multifaceted behaviour. Until now, however, there has been no attempt  
18  
19 to systematically generate an in-depth and detailed understanding of peoples’ experiences of  
20  
21 viewing UGC depicting extreme real-world violence; that is, UGC content depicting the real-world  
22  
23 torture, maiming, or death.  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31

32 UGC depicting extreme real-world violence can be easily accessed on various websites  
33  
34 (Dhal, 2018). On one website, for example, viewers are challenged to watch increasingly disturbing  
35  
36 videos of animals and people being tortured, maimed, and killed: the aim being to continue  
37  
38 watching for as long as possible and to share an ‘alleged level of callousness’ on social media  
39  
40 afterwards (Locker, 2015). This has the potential to present the consumption of UGC depicting  
41  
42 extreme real-world violence as a source of entertainment or, alternatively, as a marker of  
43  
44 psychological resilience or strength. Given that the proliferation of such content is highly unlikely  
45  
46 to disappear (Wood, 2017), a better understanding of who is engaging with it, why, and what  
47  
48 consequences it has, is needed. As there are several online discussion forums on which UGC  
49  
50 depicting torture, maiming, and death is – or has until recently been – disseminated and discussed  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

(Dhal, 2018), the publicly available comments and conversations on these platforms offer a unique opportunity to develop a richer understanding of peoples' experiences of being exposed to such content. In light of this, the aim of this research is to use naturally occurring data on an online discussion forum to answer the following, situated research question: in an era of widespread access to the Internet, social media, and fictional violent content, what is the psychological impact of viewing UGC depicting extreme real-world violence?

## Methodology

### *Data collection and sample*

Online data collection methods offer an opportunity for researchers to gather naturally occurring data on sensitive topics that may otherwise be difficult to obtain (Smedley and Coulson, 2018). Thus, to gain an insight into the psychological impact of viewing UGC depicting extreme real-world violence (henceforth, extreme real-world violence), data were gathered from Reddit. Reddit is a popular online discussion forum that hosts UGC and 'subreddits' (i.e. interest-based online communities) which is most commonly used by adolescents and young adults (aged 18-29-years-old; Auxier and Anderson, 2021). Until 2018, Reddit also hosted a subreddit with approximately 425,000 subscribers that was dedicated to watching people die in horrific circumstances (after being disembowelled, incinerated, or mangled, for example; Dhal, 2018). Additionally, Reddit continues to host a subreddit with approximately 585,000 subscribers that offers users opportunities to chance being exposed to innocent and amusing or unpleasant and often extremely violent real-world UGC (Martínez and Powell, 2021). Consequently, Reddit is an online space

1  
2  
3 where experiences of being exposed to real-world violence can be both discussed and partaken in,  
4  
5  
6 accidentally or volitionally. Reddit users do not need to reveal their identity, meaning that potentially  
7  
8 sensitive or stigmatising topics can be openly discussed behind a veil of anonymity (Suler, 2004).  
9  
10  
11 Furthermore, because Reddit is more closely moderated than online discussion forums such as  
12  
13  
14 4chan, where 'vitriolic and violent' content is more widely proliferated (Ludemann, 2018: p. 92),  
15  
16  
17 and ideas are more frequently expressed in a way that is likely to be interpreted as deeply offensive,  
18  
19  
20 disturbing, and threatening by many (Colley and Moore, 2022), it also offers a useful intermediary  
21  
22  
23 – or 'assembly room' – within the context of this research for capturing multiple, potentially  
24  
25  
26 conflicting perspectives.

27  
28  
29 As the psychological impact of viewing extreme real-world violence is an under-studied  
30  
31  
32 topic, it was deemed important to gain a variety of perspectives on how people react to it. The  
33  
34  
35 third author searched for threads on Reddit using terms such as 'gore', 'someone sent me' and the  
36  
37  
38 names of websites that host extreme real-world violence that they discovered via magazine and  
39  
40  
41 newspaper articles (e.g. Locker, 2015). The first author then selected eight out of nineteen threads  
42  
43  
44 from 2010-19 in which users disclosed varied reasons for, and experiences of, viewing UGC  
45  
46  
47 depicting torture, maiming, or death. Threads in which original posters (i.e. initiators of the thread)  
48  
49  
49 sought support, boasted of sharing, or recommended against viewing extreme real-world violence,  
50  
51  
52 and where other users shared a range of experiences, were chosen. Searching for threads was,  
53  
54  
55 therefore, an exploratory and organic process which was guided by an attempt to consider a variety  
56  
57  
58 of perspectives and generate sufficient information power to answer the research question  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 (Malterud, Siersma and Guassora, 2016). Threads that focused on exposure to mild forms of real-  
4  
5  
6 world violence or the practical steps that can be taken to report those who share it were excluded  
7  
8  
9 from the analysis. In total, 437 comments ranging from a sentence to several paragraphs in length  
10  
11 from 225 users were collated and anonymised, with most (57%) being derived from a single thread  
12  
13 which had been started by a support-seeking user who had felt distressed after accidentally viewing  
14  
15 extreme real-world violence. However, many of users who contributed to this thread shared varied  
16  
17 experiences of, and reasons for viewing, such content, meaning that it presented a ‘wide-angled  
18  
19 lens’ through which to capture a breadth of perspectives (Braun et al., 2021: p. 623). Thus, data  
20  
21 collection ended once enough had been gathered to explore what experiences people have of being  
22  
23 exposed to extreme real-world violence and tell a ‘useful story in relation to the research question’  
24  
25 (Braun and Clarke, 2021b: p. 207). Other researchers have used similar sample sizes in qualitative  
26  
27 research aimed at using online comments to develop a better understanding of sensitive topics  
28  
29 (e.g. Anderson and Clarke, 2019; Anthony and Thomas, 2010; Colley and Moore, 2022).  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39

#### 40 *Data analysis*

41  
42  
43  
44 Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse the comments because it can facilitate a high degree  
45  
46 of interpretive depth of engagement with qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2013, 2019, 2022;  
47  
48 Terry and Hayfield, 2021). The analysis was conducted from a primarily experiential orientation  
49  
50 and a critical realist perspective. In other words, the users’ written language was predominantly  
51  
52 used to develop a better understanding of their experiences (experiential orientation; Braun and  
53  
54 Clarke, 2022), and although a material reality has been thought to exist, it has been assumed that  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 access to this reality is mediated by the users, as well as underlying economic, cultural, and social  
4  
5  
6 mechanisms (critical realist perspective; Willig, 2012). The themes were actively constructed via an  
7  
8  
9 analytic process that we will now describe.

10  
11  
12 In the first phase of the analysis, the first author imported the comments into NVivo 12  
13  
14  
15 before reading them several times in an effort to facilitate immersion in, and critical engagement  
16  
17  
18 with, the data. In the second phase, the first author inductively coded the most salient segments  
19  
20  
21 of the data using ‘essence-capturing’, evocative names which were grounded in the language of the  
22  
23  
24 users (Salañda, 2021: p. 5). The process of re-reading the comments and refining the codes was  
25  
26  
27 conducted repeatedly in order to enable the first author to recursively condense, organise, and  
28  
29  
30 deepen their interpretation of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2021b, 2022). The primarily semantic  
31  
32  
33 codes were discussed with the second and fourth authors, but the concept of inter-rater reliability  
34  
35  
36 was not considered to be valuable within the context of this research because it is predicated on  
37  
38  
39 theoretical beliefs that are antithetical to the assumptions on which reflexive thematic analysis is  
40  
41  
42 foregrounded (Braun and Clarke, 2021a, 2022). Following this, the third author – who searched  
43  
44  
45 for the threads but was not involved in the initial discussions of the codes – blind-coded  
46  
47  
48 approximately two thirds of the dataset, before sharing their codes with the other authors. This  
49  
50  
51 was not done in an attempt to facilitate a consensus-based approach to coding, but to see whether  
52  
53  
54 the third author interpreted cross-case patterns that had been overlooked or interpreted in a  
55  
56  
57 different manner by the first author (Braun and Clarke, 2019, 2021b). The third author highlighted  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 several ways in which the data could be interpreted in a more nuanced manner, and discussions of  
4  
5  
6 the codes within the research team enhanced the coherence and depth of the analysis.  
7  
8  
9

10         Once the data had been coded, the first author read and reflected on the codes and the  
11  
12 extracts of data that had been captured by them in an effort to actively interpret recurring,  
13  
14 coherent, and meaningful patterns across the dataset that could be unified by core ideas (i.e. ‘central  
15  
16 organising concepts’; Braun and Clarke, 2013: p. 236). This resulted in an initial list of three  
17  
18 prototype themes, which were iteratively de- and reconstructed upon further re-reading of the  
19  
20 coded extracts of data and discussions with the other authors until five rich, multifaceted, and  
21  
22 distinct themes had been constructed and named. Theme definitions were used to capture the  
23  
24 focus, scope, and boundaries of each theme (Terry and Hayfield, 2021). In the final phases, the  
25  
26 data were re-read in full to confirm that the themes offered a plausible account of what had been  
27  
28 written in the threads and provided a compelling, thoughtful, and ‘*interpretive...* story about the  
29  
30 data’ (Braun and Clarke, 2021b: p. 339, authors’ emphasis), before being written up in an integrated  
31  
32 and logical order. The themes were named using concise and ‘catchy’ titles which provided a ‘vivid  
33  
34 sense’ of their ‘essence’ (Braun and Clarke, 2013: p. 258). Extracts of coded data are presented  
35  
36 illustratively throughout the analysis in order to provide depth, texture, and multivocal evidence  
37  
38 for the analytic claims.  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51

### 52 53 *Member reflections*

54  
55  
56 **To gain feedback on our analysis,** the themes were presented during stakeholder engagement  
57  
58 meetings to seven volunteers with experience of viewing UGC depicting real-world violence, who  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 confirmed that the themes resonated with them or ‘rang true’. The purpose of this activity was to  
4  
5 sensitively gauge whether the themes bore familial resemblances with the experiences of those  
6  
7 who have been exposed to the type of content that this research is focused on, and to therefore  
8  
9 aid our ability determine whether the analysis could be considered to possess naturalistic  
10  
11 generalisability (Smith, 2018). This was achieved by sharing the titles and definitions of the themes  
12  
13 with the volunteers, before welcoming critical, reflexive feedback on whether they reverberated  
14  
15 with their experiences or seemed ‘comprehensible and meaningful’ (Tracy, 2010, p. 844). Thus,  
16  
17 feedback from the volunteers that the themes were either directly relatable or interpreted as  
18  
19 plausible and compelling enhanced our confidence in the credibility and value of the analysis.  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28

### 29 *Ethical considerations*

30  
31  
32  
33 Ethical approval was obtained from the authors’ departmental ethics committee. As this study did  
34  
35 not involve obtaining informed consent from participants, the data were obtained from publicly  
36  
37 available threads which did not require a password, registered account, or confirmation of age to  
38  
39 access (British Psychological Society [BPS], 2021). Data were anonymised by removing identifiable  
40  
41 information and usernames (BPS, 2021). Once enough data had been gathered to answer the  
42  
43 research question, data collection ceased in the interest of not collecting excessive or superfluous  
44  
45 data, and to protect the first and third authors from needing to read more vivid descriptions of  
46  
47 extreme real-world violence than was necessary for the purpose of this research. Additionally, the  
48  
49 first and third authors took frequent and occasionally prolonged breaks from the analysis after  
50  
51 reading detailed descriptions of extreme real-world violence, and were reassured that it could be  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 paused or stopped if necessary. Regular meetings also facilitated opportunities for the research  
4  
5  
6 team to seek support from one another, and settings on Reddit were used to blur images and  
7  
8  
9 prevent auto-playing videos. We also decided against describing precisely what the users had  
10  
11 viewed in an effort to allow readers to engage with our analysis without needing to evoke upsetting  
12  
13 or distressing images within their minds.  
14  
15  
16  
17

### 18 **Analysis**

21  
22 The users had viewed UGC depicting extreme real-world violence for various reasons. Several  
23  
24 users had viewed real-world extreme violence mistakenly; out of curiosity; or had been sent it via  
25  
26 social media by people within their social networks. Others had viewed it as a challenge; sometimes  
27  
28 on a regular basis (as discussed in Themes 3 and 4, below); or had shared it with others for personal  
29  
30 amusement. We will now discuss the different ways in which the users reacted to viewing extreme  
31  
32 real-world violence via the five themes that were constructed from the data. The themes highlight  
33  
34 that while viewing such content can be an intensely distressing experience that can require a  
35  
36 prolonged amount of time and effort to recover from (Themes 1 and 2), it is also utilised by some  
37  
38 as a resource (Themes 3 and 4) or gazed upon with indifference (Theme 5) by others.  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47

#### 48 *Theme 1: 'that experience was horrible': like falling through thin ice*

51  
52 This theme captures the idea that the initial experience of viewing extreme real-world violence can  
53  
54 be psychologically harmful and distressing – in some cases in a sudden or shocking way, with  
55  
56 unexpected and immediately-felt consequences. Indeed, following their first exposure to extreme  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 real-world violence, many of the users felt disgusted (*'that was just gross'*); disturbed (*'I was deeply*  
4 *troubled'*); frightened (*'I was petrified'*); saddened (*'I cried when it was over'*); and shocked by what that  
5  
6 they had witnessed (*'your brain wants to deny it'*). Consequently, it was common for the users to  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11 disparagingly describe it as *'awful'*, *'disturbing'*, or *'obscene'*, and to regret accessing it (*'the biggest mistake*  
12 *of my life'*). Such reactions, which were occasionally described as being accompanied by prolonged  
13  
14  
15 feelings of nausea or other physical discomfort (*'it turned my stomach, I felt sick for days'*), could be  
16  
17  
18  
19 particularly severe:  
20  
21

22  
23  
24 *...it sent me into an existential crisis which lasted for days... I had to*  
25  
26 *fight with myself every waking hour afterwards. I questioned everything,*  
27  
28 *humanity, good, evil, morality, God...*  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33 *I want to be sick. I want to just die. I keep crying over and over again*  
34  
35 *after seeing this and wish so badly that I never had. What the hell made*  
36  
37 *me open it?*  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42

43 These excerpts highlight that the psychological harm that viewing real-world extreme violence can  
44  
45 inflict has the potential to be extremely upsetting rather than merely uncomfortable (a *'vulnerable*  
46 *gaze'*; Tait, 2008). This notion was exemplified in several statements: *'I'm so stupid, I feel so sick'*, *'I'm*  
47 *crying and freaking out'*, and *'I'm scared and crying'*, for example. For some users, viewing real-world  
48  
49  
50  
51 extreme violence also distorted their perceptions of normal human behaviour (*'it'll make you lose*  
52 *your faith in humanity'*), and could be disorientating (*'it fucked me up'*), especially when it involved  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57 babies and children (*'that was adults... these are fucking babies and children'*).  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 It is notable that viewing extreme real-world violence was described by several users as  
4  
5  
6 ‘scarring’ and, therefore, as difficult to forget or process (*‘the videos haunt me’*). In particular, the users  
7  
8  
9 commented on how the ‘disturbing’ sounds (*‘it’s the noises’*), as well as the ‘raw’ images (*‘you can’t unsee*  
10  
11  
12 *it’*), of suffering could be difficult to banish from their minds (*‘an image and a sough that I’ll never*  
13  
14  
15 *forget’*). This implies that viewing real-world extreme violence can be an ‘immersive and  
16  
17  
18 unforgettable’ experience (*‘I couldn’t get it out of my head’*), albeit ‘not in a good way’ (*‘very disturbing’*).  
19  
20 Several users even commented on struggling to forget what they had witnessed years after first  
21  
22  
23 doing so (*‘never shaken off that video, even years later’*); one user mentioned still being able to hear the  
24  
25  
26 sound of a woman being murdered by a group of men. These quotations highlight that viewing  
27  
28  
29 extreme real-world violence can cause discolouration of the mind (*‘it made me feel empty and numb’*),  
30  
31  
32 as well as a protracted sense of unease (*‘that fucked me up’*), which could amplify, aggravate, or  
33  
34  
35 precipitate symptoms of mental ill-health, especially among children, adolescents, and those with  
36  
37  
38 pre-existing vulnerabilities. Indeed, implied in the assertion that the content was the ‘kind of gore  
39  
40  
41 *nobody should see’* is the suggestion that such content is inherently – and extremely – harmful.

42  
43  
44 In light of the feelings of disgust that frequently accompanied being exposed to extreme  
45  
46  
47 real-world violence, several users expressed contempt and disbelief about its availability (*‘it should*  
48  
49  
50 *be on the dark web’*), as well as anger towards those who shared it (*‘you should be ashamed’*). In addition,  
51  
52  
53 some of the users warned others against viewing it (*‘don’t go there out of curiosity, trust me’*). Such  
54  
55  
56 warnings generally had a sense of authenticity to them (*‘I hope this warning keeps people who might be*  
57  
58  
59 *curious away’*), suggesting that those who issued them found the content so disturbing that they  
60

1  
2  
3 genuinely wanted others to avoid it (*'don't ever look'*). Indeed, for many users, such content seemed  
4  
5  
6 to represent *'hell on Earth'* and was perceived to be *'disturbing as hell'*, indicating that it can be  
7  
8  
9 particularly difficult to process (*'you'll never be the same'*), as well as watch (*'a very hard thing to watch*  
10  
11  
12 *and digest'*).

13  
14  
15 *Theme 2: 'give it time': a shock to the system*

16  
17  
18  
19 This theme captures the idea that recovering from the psychological distress that viewing extreme  
20  
21  
22 real-world violence can inflict often requires immediate self-care and a protracted period of time  
23  
24  
25 and patience. Indeed, users who had previously been exposed to, and felt unsettled by, viewing  
26  
27  
28 extreme real-world violence highlighted that *'time is key'* to healing (*'it might haunt you for days, but it*  
29  
30  
31 *will go away'*). These users wrote about recovering from witnessing real-world extreme violence in  
32  
33  
34 a manner that was akin to describing healing from a physical injury or illness, in which time (*'give*  
35  
36  
37 *it time'*); patience (*'the nauseous feeling fades'*); self-care (*'fill yourself with goodness'*); and distraction is  
38  
39  
40 needed (*'focus on other things'*). In this sense, viewing real-world extreme violence was framed as a  
41  
42  
43 psychologically distressing experience which it is not possible to recover from quickly (*'wait it out'*);  
44  
45  
46 or, to use a colloquial term, 'slap a band-aid on':

47  
48 *You just have to be patient ...all I can really say is that you need to give*

49  
50  
51 *some time, until you forget about it. Or until you're not bothered by it...*

52  
53  
54 *Just be patient*

1  
2  
3 In response to the feelings of shock that arose from viewing real-world extreme violence (*what the*  
4 *actual fuck?*), the users often expressed an unattainable desire to ‘unsee’ what they had witnessed  
5  
6 (*please, I’m serious I wanna forget it*). Regretful and conscious of their inability to erase what they had  
7  
8 experienced from their minds (*[I don’t know] why I did it to myself*), the users often encouraged  
9  
10 each other to watch innocent videos of ‘kittens’, ‘funny cartoons’ or ‘random acts of kindness’ in an  
11  
12 attempt to ease the psychological pain that had been inflicted (*force those negative images out of your*  
13  
14 *head*). In this sense, the users attempted to purify their minds of the toxic sights and sounds that  
15  
16 had congested and polluted them (*I never thought I would see [a child die in a car crash]*). Indeed, the  
17  
18 most frequently recommended subreddit was called ‘r/eyebleach’, a title which implies the need to  
19  
20 purge the mind of infestation, stains, and impurities (*watch something that makes you happy*). Thus,  
21  
22 viewing light-hearted and amusing videos acted as a source of emotion-focused coping (Lazarus  
23  
24 & Folkman, 1984): its aim being to sooth, and distract from, ‘raw’ and swollen (psychological)  
25  
26 wounds (*distract yourself by doing something different*). However, some users were vocal that this  
27  
28 method was ineffective when particularly unsettling UGC had been encountered (*r/eyebleach doesn’t*  
29  
30 *fix this*).

31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46 After watching people being tortured or dying in horrific circumstances, users often sought  
47  
48 to restore a sense of psychological equilibrium by affirming that *there are good people on this planet*.  
49  
50 Thus, these users sought to position the (extreme) content that they had witnessed as  
51  
52 unrepresentative of (normal) human behaviour (*I still have faith in humanity, despite what I’ve seen*).  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 Some users recommended watching videos of people behaving kindly towards one another in an  
4  
5  
6 effort to reframe or ‘counterbalance’ their (now) distorted perception of human behaviour:

7  
8  
9  
10 *...go and watch people being truly altruistic or heroic, stuff that makes*  
11  
12 *you cry at how good people can be to one another. That’s what works for*  
13  
14 *me to. That works for me to counteract the horrible shadows that lurk*  
15  
16  
17  
18 *in the corners*  
19

20  
21  
22 This excerpt contrasts pro-social or non-threatening human behaviour, which can be witnessed in  
23  
24 many online and offline spaces, with extremely violent human behaviour which is less common  
25  
26 and exists in the spatially constrained and perception-distorting ‘corners’ of ‘antisocial media’  
27  
28 (Wood, 2017: p. 169). This implies that the user understood, and wished to remind others, that  
29  
30 atrocities are rare, and that it is important to step back from the engulfing ‘shadows’ in order to  
31  
32 perceive human behaviour clearly again after viewing extreme real-world violence. One user even  
33  
34 sought to consider the social, political, and economic circumstances that heighten the possibilities  
35  
36 of warfare or crime-related violence happening (*‘if those people lived in a different place, they may have*  
37  
38 *behaved differently’*). Thus, after witnessing real-world extreme violence, a period of self-care,  
39  
40 distraction, and cognitive reappraisal is often needed before it is possible to get ‘the images out’ and  
41  
42 see clearly again (*‘after some weeks you don’t even remember it and just leave it as another trashy moment’*). It  
43  
44 can, therefore, be thought of as potentially traumatic. While being exposed to real-world extreme  
45  
46 violence appeared to be experienced as distressing by the majority of the users, some responded  
47  
48 differently; it to these alternative, minority perspectives that we will now focus our attention.  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

Theme 3: *'another degree of appreciation for my life': a grounding exercise*

This theme captures the idea that viewing extreme real-world violence was occasionally framed as an appreciation- and awareness-inducing experience (*'it makes me feel more thankful'*), which – for some – was returned to time and again as a grounding exercise or technique (*'it makes me feel better'*). In particular, some users shared a perception that witnessing death forced them to recognise the finiteness of life (*'it makes me recognise the value of life and the fact that any day could be my last'*), which acted as an *'important'* reminder to be grateful (*'people dying makes me more grateful for what I have, and that's important to me'*), as well as more cautious and mindful of their behaviour (*'it's why I'm careful about using my mobile near cars and don't fly'*). In this sense, seeing people die made some of these users more keenly aware of the value and unpredictability of life in a way that media footage of death could not (*'news is one thing'*).

Some of the users commented on how viewing real-world extreme violence roused them from a perceived state of unawareness about the existence of such behaviour (*'slaps some sense into me'*), which was thought of as being inflicted upon other people in other places:

*...it's humbling, I guess. Living in a rich country, in a safe area, with a good job, it's easy to forget what else is going on in the world. To see people die like this makes me appreciate what I have*

These users framed the content as offering a *'valuable'* opportunity to acknowledge the *'unpredictable'* and *'sharp realities of life'*. In this sense, it prompted them to *'step back'* from the narrow view of

1  
2  
3 their daily stresses and feel amazed by how *'beautiful'* and *'ephemeral'* life is from a different vantage  
4  
5  
6 point (*'that gave me a much greater level of appreciation for my life'*). Indeed, viewed from a different  
7  
8  
9 position, life was transformed in to an awe-inspiring, *'beautiful miracle'*, especially within the context  
10  
11  
12 of being viscerally reminded of how fragile humans are (*'it's just amazing to realize that is what we are*  
13  
14 *made of'*). In turn, these users commented on how witnessing death helped them to *'realise the value*  
15  
16 *of life'*.

21 Viewing extreme real-world violence also prompted some of the users to appreciate their  
22  
23 otherwise taken for granted safety from cartels, terrorists, and other *'demons in this world'*. Indeed,  
24  
25 the sense of gratefulness that these users claimed to experience was often expressed with reference  
26  
27 to living in economically advanced and generally politically stable geographic regions, such as  
28  
29 North America, where atrocities and corruption take place far less frequently than in (some)  
30  
31 developing countries (*'take it for granted that I can walk about without even thinking that I might die, it's*  
32  
33 *such a blessing'*).

41 Other users described viewing real-world extreme violence as an *'educational'* opportunity  
42  
43 to learn about potentially lethal danger, and how to avoid it, by observing *'patterns in how people die'*:  
44  
45  
46  
47

48 *I learned not to go behind trucks and lorries because they can back up*  
49  
50  
51 *without seeing you*  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

Several users also commented on how the sense of gratitude that they derived from viewing real-world extreme violence made them more mindful of their attitudes and behaviours towards other people, which prompted them to be more patient and thoughtful:

*...it reminds me to cherish the time that I have to care for loved ones.*

*Anything that I say could be the last things that I say Anything that I*

*do to someone could be that last thing that is done to them. I don't want*

*those things to be bad*

Positioning real-world extreme violence as virtue-cultivating (*'it reminds me to enjoy living and be present in the moment, and to be thoughtful around others'*), some of these users also urged others to channel their reaction to what they had seen towards cultivating a more gratuitous outlook (*'never forget what humans can do sometimes'*). Being exposed to real-world extreme violence can, therefore, be experienced as cathartic; that is, as a purification of the mind rather than a psychological infliction that needs to be cleansed (*'we are lucky to be alive, life is short'*).

*Theme 4: 'toughen up dude': it does you good*

This theme captures the idea that viewing extreme real-world violence is sometimes framed as a resource that can be directed towards enhancing – or displaying – psychological resilience. Several users who had viewed real-world extreme violence on multiple occasions commented on becoming *'desensitised'* and *'numb'* to it (*'you get used to it'*); some reflected on purposefully inducing this state in an attempt to become what they perceived to be psychologically *'stronger'* or *'tougher'* (*'gotten myself*

1  
2  
3 *used to them deliberately*). Even users who had initially found viewing extreme real-world violence  
4  
5  
6 distressing **sometimes** engaged in this behaviour, and boasted of consequently being able to watch  
7  
8  
9 torture, maiming, and death as though it is a desirable, socially acceptable signifier of strength:

10  
11  
12 *...you just have to keep going back. I used to feel sick when I watched*  
13  
14  
15 *these but now I'm desensitised. I watch them everyday when I wake up...*  
16  
17  
18  
19 *...after I'd handled the shock, I thought "right, this is the real world, I*  
20  
21  
22 *need to be able to cope with this more easily." I started watching the worst*  
23  
24  
25 *stuff available until I wasn't bothered. Now I believe I'm mentally*  
26  
27  
28 *stronger...*  
29

30  
31 Often, boasting of being able to watch extreme real-world violence was expressed in an explicitly  
32  
33  
34 gendered manner (*a proper man keeps on browsing until it doesn't bother him anymore*). Other users framed  
35  
36  
37 viewing it as an opportunity to 'face reality' (*this isn't a joke, it happens and its real*), as well as to  
38  
39  
40 prepare themselves for death (*it's best to be prepared*). In both cases, it was presented as facilitating,  
41  
42  
43 as opposed to inhibiting, growth and development (*now I can look and it's fine*). This was rationalised  
44  
45  
46 by some users who pointed out that paramedics, police, and soldiers are often confronted with  
47  
48  
49 extreme real-world violence, potentially overlooking the fact that these people also experience  
50  
51  
52 trauma:

53  
54  
55 *Learn to cope with worse and worse gruesome images. How do think the*  
56  
57  
58 *police or military do it? They don't all get post-traumatic stress disorder*  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 Positioning extreme real-world violence as a form of ‘entertainment’ (*pretty obsessed with watching this*  
4 *shit*), some of the users also commented on viewing it for personal pleasure (*like watching humanity*  
5 *suffer*). Furthermore, these users often framed those who found such content distressing as overly  
6 sensitive ‘*bitches*’ or ‘*softies*’ (*cry-baby*), frequently coupled with homophobic or gender-based slurs,  
7 implying that their characteristics and reactions to seeing human and non-human animals being  
8 tortured, maimed, or killed is indicative of embodied or emotional deficiency (*toughen up dude, we*  
9 *all die*). Indeed, some of the users asserted that watching torture, maiming, and death ought to be  
10 amusing (*it’s a laugh*). In this vein, some users presented those who offered support to those who  
11 found real-world extreme violence harmful as ‘social justice warriors’ or ‘*white knights*’ (terms that  
12 are used pejoratively to describe those who express or promote socially progressive values;  
13 Ohlheiser, 2015), thereby suggesting that they were reacting to it an excessively dramatic manner  
14 (*don’t be a pussy*). The alternative: *get over it and keep going*. Viewing real-world extreme violence can,  
15 therefore, sometimes be perceived to be a non-deviant behaviour and a signifier of (often  
16 masculine) strength and maturity (*to get adjusted everyone needs to experience this*). This perspective may  
17 be encouraged and legitimised when expressed within the realms of participatory and curated social  
18 media spaces dedicated to disseminating and consuming UGC depicting real-world extreme  
19 violence (Wood, 2017; also see Colley and Moore, 2022).

20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52 *Theme 5: ‘some people are just more sensitive’: it is what it is*  
53  
54

55  
56 This theme captures the idea that some of the users expressed indifference about viewing real-  
57 world extreme violence, describing **it** as neither harmful nor beneficial (*do feel sorry for the victims*  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 *when they get tortured or die but I don't really feel much*). Some of the users recognised that, although they  
4  
5  
6 felt indifferent about extreme real-world violence, most people react differently to such content  
7  
8  
9 (*don't react how other people do*). Occasionally, there was a self-deprecating tone to these admissions  
10  
11 (*feel really bad because I didn't feel disgusted*), suggesting that some of the users felt uncomfortable  
12  
13  
14 about not finding extreme real-world violence unsettling (*that's the more natural response*). Indeed,  
15  
16  
17 this notion was evident in some of the responses to those who had found it upsetting:

20  
21 *... understand that it shows you are a normal person with emotions, it's*  
22  
23  
24 *people that frequently watch and don't react that should be worried*

25  
26  
27  
28 Some of the users appeared to create psychological space between themselves and the extreme  
29  
30  
31 real-world violence that they had viewed by trivialising it (*it's just videos to me*), and therefore set  
32  
33  
34 the scene for indifference to be presented as an acceptable rather than deficient reaction (*it's not*  
35  
36 *that bad*). Indeed, several users asserted that viewing extreme real-world violence as a physically  
37  
38  
39 distant, online observer should not be considered to be objectionable or psychologically distressing  
40  
41  
42 because it does not, in itself, cause suffering in the real-world (*whether you watch it or not, nothing*  
43  
44 *changes*). Thus, such users established insulation between themselves and the content (*it's not like*  
45  
46  
47 *he would have lived if I never watched it*), which may have made it easier for them to process what they  
48  
49  
50 had experienced (*just go about my day after*). In this vein, several users attempted to use humour (*you*  
51  
52  
53 *have to have such dark humour to cope with the horrible things in this world*), or sought to blame the people  
54  
55  
56 who had died for their deaths in an humorous tone (*if you're not supposed to climb it, don't, fools*),  
57  
58  
59 suggesting that downplaying or joking about the act of viewing real-world extreme violence may  
60

1  
2  
3 also be used a way of coping with having done so (*'come on people, think'*). In other words, it situates  
4  
5  
6 viewing extreme real-world violence outside of the realms of reprehension or regret by placing the  
7  
8  
9 responsibility for the content's existence on the people who were harmed or injured (*'people just*  
10  
11 *being stupid'*).

12  
13  
14  
15 In positioning the act of viewing extreme real-world violence as inconsequential, the need  
16  
17  
18 to engage in potentially distressing thought processes about the morality of viewing torture,  
19  
20  
21 maiming, and death – which others described as *'gross'*, *'disgusting'*, and *'disrespectful'* – is foreclosed  
22  
23  
24 and avoided:

25  
26  
27  
28 *I laughed, not because she was being killed but because everyone else so*  
29  
30  
31 *was scared, even though he obviously only wanted to kill the girl*  
32

33  
34 Thus, after witnessing real-world extreme violence, denial of wrongdoing could act as a coping  
35  
36  
37 strategy: 'It is what it is, what am I supposed to do about it?' It is also possible, however, that  
38  
39  
40 indifference is expressed in a self-curated attempt to display bravado or 'edginess' in the presence  
41  
42  
43 of peers. Regardless, indifference may lead to the continuation or cessation of viewing it; it is  
44  
45  
46 difficult to determine which is more likely on the basis of this analysis.  
47  
48

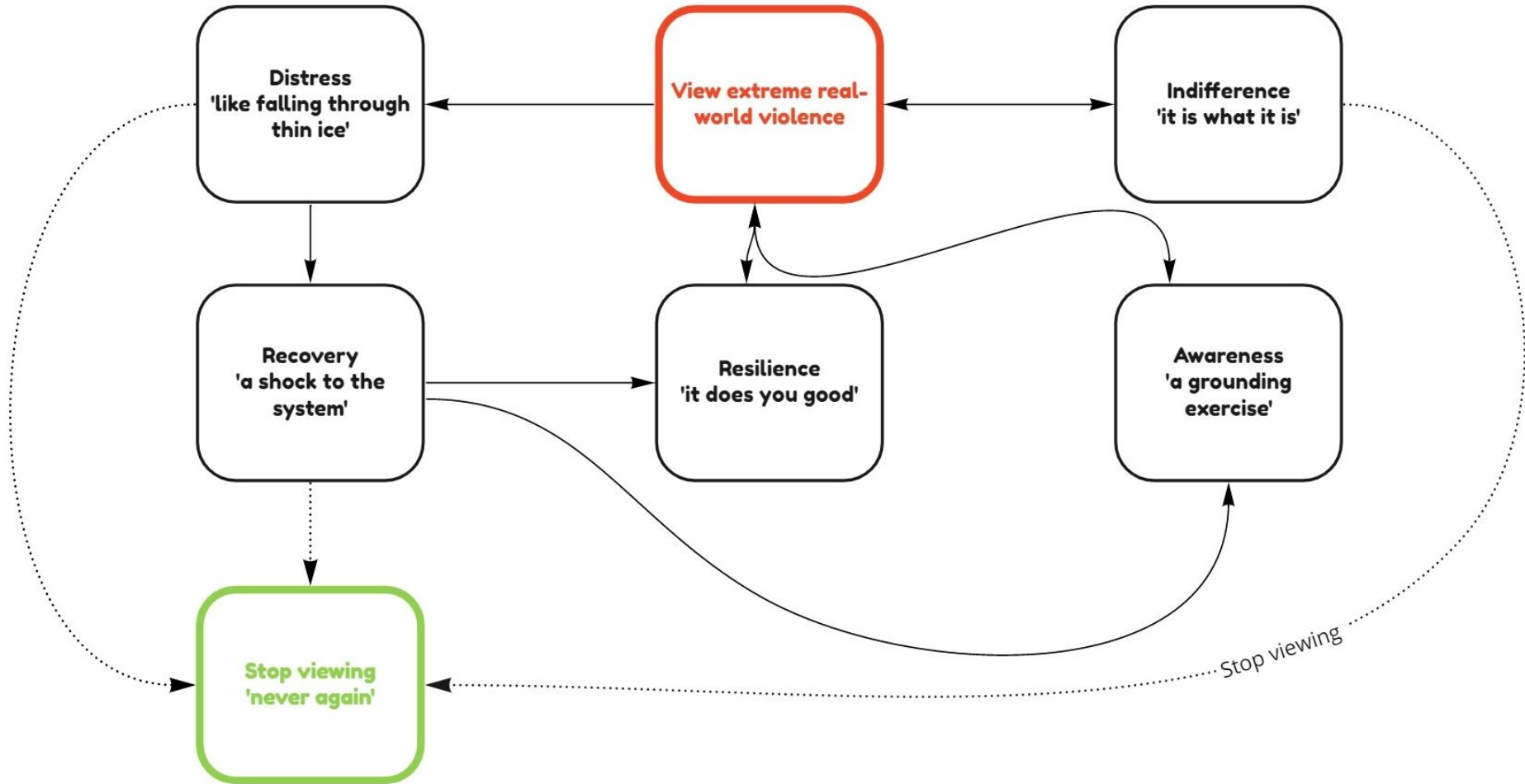
## 49 Summary

50  
51  
52  
53 The themes highlight that while viewing human and non-human animals being tortured, maimed,  
54  
55  
56 or killed can be experienced as psychologically distressing, grounding (i.e. situational awareness-  
57  
58  
59 enhancing) or strengthening; some people appear to feel relatively indifferent about it – an attitude  
60

1  
2  
3 that may be facilitated by humour and moral reasoning. Based on this analysis, Figure 1 displays  
4  
5  
6 the connections between the psychological responses to viewing extreme real-world violence that  
7  
8  
9 we have observed, and the pathways that may lead people to cease or continue watching it.  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

For Peer Review

Figure 1: Connections between psychological responses to viewing user-generated content depicting extreme real-world violence



1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46

## Conclusion

This is, to our knowledge, the first study to use naturally occurring data to systematically investigate, and generate a detailed understanding of, the experience of viewing UGC depicting extreme real-world violence in an era of widespread access to the Internet, social media, and fictional violent content. Our findings contribute towards a small but important body of literature that suggests that viewing UGC depicting real-world violence is a complex and heterogeneous behaviour (Tait, 2008; Wood, 2018), while also underlining the serious harm that viewing extreme variations of it has the potential to inflict.

Our data were collated from an online forum, meaning that the discussions were user-generated and developed organically outside of the influence of researchers. While this has several advantages, it is important to remain conscious that social norms and self-presentational factors will have influenced what people wrote and how they wrote it (Jowett, 2015). Nevertheless, the data seem trustworthy and informative. Indeed, many users disclose experiences and perceptions that might be stigmatised or perceived to be deviant or 'weak'. This indicates that, consistent with the theory of online disinhibition (Suler, 2004), the users felt comfortable disclosing sensitive information. Despite this, given that our data were harvested from users on a single online discussion forum, we cannot be sure whether, or to what extent, the attitudes and experiences we encountered are typical of other Internet users who engage with this type of content. This is especially true for users of less closely moderated discussion forums that are dedicated to enabling unbridled freedom of expression, and where vitriolic and distressing content is more widely

1  
2  
3 disseminated, discussed, and valued (Ludemann, 2018), although recent research has illuminated  
4  
5  
6 the many ethical, epistemological, and political challenges that are inherently implicated in  
7  
8  
9 analysing the experiences and perceptions of users of these platforms, which include 4chan, 8chan,  
10  
11 and Gab.ai, among others (Colley and Moore, 2022). While this does not diminish the value of our  
12  
13  
14 research, because it is not the aim of qualitative research to generalise to entire populations (Smith,  
15  
16  
17 2018), it does mean that additional research with more diverse samples is needed to complement  
18  
19  
20 and expand on this study.  
21  
22  
23

24 In this study, it has been found that while viewing extreme real-world violence online can  
25  
26 be harmful, it is not experienced as such by everyone (Tait, 2008). Importantly, this research also  
27  
28 revealed an unanticipated insight: that viewing such content can act as a grounding exercise for  
29  
30 some people. Those who experience this find viewing extreme real-world violence cathartic: it is  
31  
32 exercised from a position of aspiring to 'step back' from the 'stresses and stains' of modern life,  
33  
34 decompress, and enhance their situational awareness and sense of gratefulness. It seems that those  
35  
36 who experience this may return to similar content time and again in the hope of inducing this  
37  
38 outcome – a behaviour which may be maladaptive in the long-term (Feinstein, Audet and Waknine,  
39  
40 2014). Further research is needed to determine whether those who view extreme real-world  
41  
42 violence online as a grounding exercise are lacking in awareness of, or access to, alternative, more  
43  
44 benign approaches to decentring. Understanding this has the potential to inform interventions  
45  
46 aimed at orientating people away from this potentially harmful activity.  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 Our analysis suggests that some people appear regularly view extreme real-world violence  
4  
5  
6 in the belief that it will make them psychologically stronger, tougher, or more resilient – a notion  
7  
8  
9 that was often, although not exclusively, grounded in gendered language. The idea, expressed by  
10  
11  
12 some users, that strong or ‘manly’ individuals should be able to watch such content suggests that  
13  
14  
15 perceived or injunctive social norms may be driving their engagement. Comments perpetuating  
16  
17  
18 this idea also indicate that the promotion of social norms regarding this behaviour may occur in  
19  
20  
21 some online forums. Carefully designed interventions to correct misperceptions of social norms,  
22  
23  
24 which can be effective in reducing engagement in risky behaviours (Dempsey et al., 2018), may,  
25  
26  
27 therefore, have utility in this field. Indeed, promoting an understanding that most people consider  
28  
29  
30 UGC depicting real-world violence to be unamusing and distressing – as found in other research  
31  
32  
33 (Nicklin, Swain and Lloyd, 2020) – may reduce the possibility of those most at risk of viewing or  
34  
35  
36 sharing it in the belief that it is a socially acceptable behaviour from doing so.

37  
38 Our analysis suggests that the distress that viewing extreme real-world violence has the  
39  
40  
41 potential to inflict can be extremely harmful. This is likely to be especially true for children and  
42  
43  
44 adolescents, who are particularly susceptible to experiencing distress after viewing violent  
45  
46  
47 mainstream media footage of it in the news (Ferrara et al., 2016). There may also be other  
48  
49  
50 demographic groups who are especially vulnerable to resultant psychological distress, such as those  
51  
52  
53 experiencing chronic stress or with pre-existing mental health difficulties, although further  
54  
55  
56 research is needed to establish this. Users whose comments were analysed in this research  
57  
58  
59 expressed a constellation of negative emotional symptoms, such as disgust, sadness, and regret, as  
60

1  
2  
3 well as prolonged feelings of nausea and psychological ‘scarring’. The constrained nature of the  
4  
5 data meant that it was often difficult to unpack or contextualise these feelings in greater depth,  
6  
7 meaning that the analytic focus had to be on *broad* but recurring, coherent patterns of meaning.  
8  
9 Nevertheless, numerous users clearly felt upset and sought help from others, which was often  
10  
11 offered to them by well-meaning users. Watching innocent and amusing videos, distracting oneself,  
12  
13 and allowing time to pass (and memories to fade) was described as key to the healing process.  
14  
15 Some people may also require targeted, professional support given that an extreme initial reaction  
16  
17 was sometimes evident, and many users commented on taking a long time (i.e. several weeks) to  
18  
19 recover.  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29

30 Quantitative research is needed in order to determine what proportion of people view mild  
31  
32 versus moderate to extreme forms of UGC depicting real-world violence, and what demographic  
33  
34 and psychological characteristics are associated with these behaviours. Furthermore, one-to-one  
35  
36 qualitative interviews, while placing individuals in less naturalistic setting, are needed to provide a  
37  
38 confidential setting for people to share their lived experiences without worrying about peer-  
39  
40 judgements, and to allow researchers to understand their lived experience in greater depth. Overall,  
41  
42 however, this research has made a novel contribution to our understanding of a seemingly  
43  
44 prevalent yet under-studied phenomena, providing essential insights and firm foundations for  
45  
46 further exploration of this topic.  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53

## 54 55 56 57 58 59 60 References

1  
2  
3 Anthony MG and Thomas RJ (2010) 'This is citizen journalism at its finest': YouTube and the  
4  
5  
6 public sphere in the Oscar Grant shooting incident. *New Media and Society* 12(8): 1280-1296.  
7  
8

9 Anderson S and Clarke V (2019) Disgust, shame and the psychosocial impact of skin picking:  
10  
11  
12 Evidence from an online support forum. *Journal of Health Psychology* 24(13): 1773-1784.  
13  
14

15 Auxier B and Anderson A (2021) Social media use in 2021. *Pew Research Centre*, 7 April. Available  
16  
17  
18 at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/04/07/social-media-use-in-2021/>  
19  
20  
21

22 Barrie C (2020) Searching racism after George Floyd. *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World*,  
23  
24  
25 6: 1-3.  
26  
27

28 Bender PK, Plante C and Gentile DA (2018) The effects of violent media content on aggression.  
29  
30  
31 *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 19: 104–108.  
32  
33

34 Boyd RW and Swanson WS (2016) The evolution of virtual violence: how mobile screens provide  
35  
36  
37 windows to real violence. *Pediatrics*, 138(2): doi: <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2016-1358>  
38  
39  
40

41 Braun V and Clarke V (2022) Conceptual and design thinking for thematic analysis. *Qualitative*  
42  
43  
44 *Psychology*, 9(1): 3-26.  
45  
46

47 Braun V and Clarke V (2021a) One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive)  
48  
49  
50 thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 18(3): 328–352.  
51  
52

53 Braun V and Clarke V (2021b) To saturate or not to saturate? Questioning data saturation as a  
54  
55  
56 useful concept for thematic analysis and sample-size rationales. *Qualitative Research in Sport,*  
57  
58  
59 *Exercise and Health*, 13(2): 201–216.  
60

1  
2  
3 Braun V and Clarke V (2019) Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport,*  
4  
5  
6 *Exercise and Health*, 11(4): 589–597.

7  
8  
9 Braun V and Clarke V (2013) *Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners*. London:  
10  
11  
12 SAGE.

13  
14  
15  
16 Braun, V, Clarke V, Boulton E, Davey E and McEvoy C (2021) The online survey as a qualitative  
17  
18  
19 research tool. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*. 24(6): 641–654.

20  
21  
22 British Psychological Society (2021) *Ethical guidelines for internet-mediated research*. Available at:  
23  
24  
25 [https://www.bps.org.uk/sites/www.bps.org.uk/files/Policy/Policy%20-](https://www.bps.org.uk/sites/www.bps.org.uk/files/Policy/Policy%20-%20Files/Ethics%20Guidelines%20for%20Internet-mediated%20Research.pdf)  
26  
27  
28 [%20Files/Ethics%20Guidelines%20for%20Internet-mediated%20Research.pdf](https://www.bps.org.uk/sites/www.bps.org.uk/files/Policy/Policy%20-%20Files/Ethics%20Guidelines%20for%20Internet-mediated%20Research.pdf)

29  
30  
31  
32 Chassiakas YLR Radesky J Christakis D Moreno MA and Cross C (2016) Children and adolescents  
33  
34  
35 and digital media. *Pediatrics*, 138(5): 0.1542/peds.2016-2593

36  
37  
38 Colley T and Moore M (2022) The challenges of studying 4chan and the Alt-Right: ‘Come on in  
39  
40  
41 the water’s fine’. *New Media and Society*, 24(1): 5–30.

42  
43  
44  
45 Dempsey RC, McAlaney J and Bewick BM (2018) A critical appraisal of the social norms approach  
46  
47  
48 as an interventional strategy for health-related behavior and attitude change. *Frontiers in*  
49  
50  
51 *Psychology*, 9. DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2018.02180

52  
53  
54 Dhal K (2018). ‘Exploitation on the internet? The morality of watching death online’, *The Guardian*,  
55  
56  
57 12 October. Available at:  
58  
59  
60 <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/oct/12/reddit-r-watch-people-die>

1  
2  
3 Dowsett A and Jackson M (2019) The effect of violence and competition within video games on  
4  
5 aggression. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 99: 22–27.  
6  
7

8  
9 Drummond A, Sauer JD, Ferguson CJ, Cannon PR and Hall LC (2021) Violent and non-violent  
10  
11 virtual reality video games: Influences on affect, aggressive cognition, and aggressive  
12  
13 behavior. Two pre-registered experiments. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 95. DOI:  
14  
15 10.1016/j.jesp.2021.104119  
16  
17  
18

19  
20  
21 Feinstein A, Audet B and Waknine E (2014) Witnessing images of extreme violence: a  
22  
23 psychological study of journalists in the newsroom. *JRSM Open*, 5(6). DOI:  
24  
25 <https://doi.org/10.1177/2054270414533323>  
26  
27  
28

29  
30 Ferguson CJ and Wang CJ (2021) Aggressive video games are not a risk factor for mental health  
31  
32 problems in youth: a longitudinal study. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 24(1):  
33  
34 70–73.  
35  
36  
37

38  
39 Ferrara E, Varol O, Davis C, Menczer F and Flammini A (2016) The rise of social bots.  
40  
41  
42 *Communications of the ACM*, 59(7): 96–104.  
43  
44  
45

46  
47 Grizzard M, Huang J, Weiss JK, Novotny ER, Fitzgerald KS, Ahn C, Ngoh Z, Plante A and Chu  
48  
49 H (2017) Graphic violence as moral motivator: The effects of graphically violent content  
50  
51 in news. *Mass Communication and Society*, 20(6): 763–783.  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 Holman AE, Garfin DR, Lubens P and Silver RC (2020) Media exposure to collective trauma,  
4  
5  
6 mental health, and functioning: does it matter what you see? *Clinical Psychological Science*,  
7  
8  
9 8(1): 111–124.

10  
11  
12 Hopwood T and Schutte N (2017) Psychological outcomes in reaction to media exposure to  
13  
14  
15 disasters and large-scale violence: A meta-analysis. *Psychology of Violence*, 7(2): 316–327.

16  
17  
18  
19 International Telecommunications Union (2021) *Facts and figures*. Available at:  
20  
21  
22 <https://www.itu.int/itu-d/reports/statistics/facts-figures-2021/>  
23  
24

25  
26 Jowett A (2015) A case for using online discussion forums in critical psychological research.  
27  
28  
29 *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 12(3): 287–297.

30  
31  
32 Krause KA Smyth C and Jansen KL (2020) Exploring the effects of violent video games on  
33  
34  
35 healthcare trainees. *Simulation and Gaming*, 51(5): 653–665.

36  
37  
38  
39 Krumm J Davies N and Narayanaswami C (2008) User-generated content. *IEEE Pervasive*  
40  
41  
42 *Computing*, 7(4): 10–11.

43  
44  
45 Lazarus R and Folkman S (1984) *Stress, Appraisal, and Coping*. New York, NY: Springer.

46  
47  
48  
49 Locker T (2015) Run the gauntlet is the most disgusting challenge on the internet. *Vice*, 29 October.  
50  
51  
52 Available at: [https://www.vice.com/en/article/3da873/run-the-gauntlet-is-the-most-](https://www.vice.com/en/article/3da873/run-the-gauntlet-is-the-most-disgusting-challenge-on-the-internet)  
53  
54  
55 [disgusting-challenge-on-the-internet](https://www.vice.com/en/article/3da873/run-the-gauntlet-is-the-most-disgusting-challenge-on-the-internet)  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 Ludemann D (2018) /pol/emics: Ambiguity, scales, and digital discourse on 4chan. *Discourse,*  
4  
5  
6 *Context and Media*, 24: 92–98.  
7

8  
9  
10 Malterud K Siersma VD and Guassora AD (2016) Sample size in qualitative interview studies:  
11  
12  
13 Guided by information power. *Qualitative Health Research*, 26(13): 1753–1760.  
14

15  
16 Martinez F and Powell A (2021) Reddit 50/50: The daring challenge suddenly taking over the  
17  
18  
19 internet. Daily Dot, 3 February. Available at: [https://www.dailydot.com/unclick/reddit-](https://www.dailydot.com/unclick/reddit-50-50/?msclid=789254bfd06c11ec88222d5f0fa21741)  
20  
21  
22 [50-50/?msclid=789254bfd06c11ec88222d5f0fa21741](https://www.dailydot.com/unclick/reddit-50-50/?msclid=789254bfd06c11ec88222d5f0fa21741)  
23  
24

25  
26 National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (2022) Children’s experiences of legal  
27  
28  
29 but harmful content online. Available at:  
30  
31 [https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/media/2727/legal-but-harmful-content-online-helplines-](https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/media/2727/legal-but-harmful-content-online-helplines-insight-briefing.pdf)  
32  
33  
34 [insight-briefing.pdf](https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/media/2727/legal-but-harmful-content-online-helplines-insight-briefing.pdf)  
35  
36

37  
38 Nicklin LL, Swain E and Lloyd J (2020) Reactions to unsolicited violent, and sexual, explicit media  
39  
40  
41 content shared over social media: gender differences and links with prior exposure  
42  
43  
44 *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(2). DOI:  
45  
46  
47 <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17124296>  
48  
49

50  
51 Ohlheiser A (2015) Why ‘social justice warrior,’ a Gamergate insult, is now a dictionary entry. *The*  
52  
53  
54 *Washington Post*, 7 October. Available at: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2015/10/07/why-social-justice-warrior-a-gamergate-insult-is-now-a-dictionary-entry/)  
55  
56  
57 [intersect/wp/2015/10/07/why-social-justice-warrior-a-gamergate-insult-is-now-a-](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2015/10/07/why-social-justice-warrior-a-gamergate-insult-is-now-a-dictionary-entry/)  
58  
59  
60 [dictionary-entry/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2015/10/07/why-social-justice-warrior-a-gamergate-insult-is-now-a-dictionary-entry/)

1  
2  
3 Redmond S, Jones NM, Holman EA and Silver RC (2019) Who watches an ISIS beheading – and  
4  
5 why. *American Psychologist*, 74(5): 555–568.

6  
7  
8  
9 Salañda J (2021) *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. 4th edn. London: SAGE.

10  
11  
12  
13 Smedley RM and Coulson NS (2018) A practical guide to analysing online support  
14  
15 forums. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 18(1): 76–103.

16  
17  
18  
19 Smith B (2018) Generalizability in qualitative research: misunderstandings, opportunities and  
20  
21 recommendations for the sport and exercise sciences. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise*  
22  
23 *and Health*, 10(1): 137–149.

24  
25  
26  
27 Suler J (2004) The online disinhibition effect. *Cyberpsychology and Behavior*, 7(3): 321–326.

28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33 Tait S (2008) Pornographies of violence? Internet spectatorship on body horror *Critical Studies in*  
34  
35 *Media Communication*, 25(1): 91–111.

36  
37  
38  
39 Terry G and Hayfield N (2021) *Essentials of Thematic Analysis*. Washington, DC: American  
40  
41 Psychological Association.

42  
43  
44  
45  
46 Thompson RR, Jones NM, Holman EA and Silver RC (2019) Media exposure to mass violence  
47  
48 events can fuel a cycle of distress. *Science Advances*, 5(4). DOI: 10.1126/sciadv.aav3502

49  
50  
51  
52  
53 Tracy SJ (2010) Qualitative quality: Eight “Big-Tent” criteria for excellent qualitative research.  
54  
55 *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(10): 837–851.

1  
2  
3 Twenge JM Martin GM and Spitzberg BH (2019) Trends in U.S. Adolescents' media use, 1976–  
4  
5  
6 2016: The rise of digital media, the decline of TV, and the (near) demise of print. *Psychology*  
7  
8  
9 of *Popular Media Culture*, 8(4): 329–345.

10  
11  
12 Udwan G Leurs K and Alencar A (2020) Digital resilience tactics of Syrian refugees in the  
13  
14  
15 Netherlands: Social media for social support, health, and identity. *Social Media + Society*,  
16  
17  
18 6(2): DOI: 10.1177/2056305120915587

19  
20  
21  
22 Willig C (2012) 'Perspectives on the epistemological bases for qualitative research. In Cooper H  
23  
24  
25 Camic PM Long FL Panter AT Rindskopf D and Sher KF (eds) *APA handbook of research*  
26  
27  
28 *methods in psychology: Vol. 2. Research designs: Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological, and*  
29  
30  
31 *biological*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, pp. 5–21.

32  
33  
34 Wood MA (2017) Antisocial media and algorithmic deviancy amplification: Analysing the id of  
35  
36  
37 Facebook's technological unconscious. *Theoretical Criminology*, 21(2): 168–185.

38  
39  
40  
41 Wood MA (2018) 'I just wanna see someone get knocked the fuck out': spectating affray on  
42  
43  
44 Facebook fight pages. *Crime, Media, Culture*, 14(1): 23–40.