

Shared Causal Theories about Film Violence and Violent Behaviour: Findings from Young Malaysian Indians

Ramachandran Ponnann[~]

School of Communication, Taylor's University, Malaysia

Antoon De Rycker*

School of Humanities & Social Sciences, Berjaya University College, Malaysia

Yang Lai Fong[^]

School of Communication, Taylor's University, Malaysia

Mohammad Abeer Syed[~]

School of Communication, Taylor's University, Malaysia

© The Author(s) 2018.

ABSTRACT

Film is an essential part of the fabric of Indian communities, also in Malaysia. Local media and social commentary frequently argue that film violence causes violent or aggressive behaviour, especially among Malaysian Indian youths. This article examines to what extent the young Indian filmgoers themselves subscribe to this view. The research approach consists of a survey questionnaire, which was administered in the first half of 2016 among 360 young Indian filmgoers, largely from urban peripherals in West Malaysia. Correlational and regression analyses show that for most young Malaysian Indians, the social cognitions about film violence and violence are broadly consistent with the academic literature and the catalyst model of violent crime. The strongest agreement was found for the constructive role of parents in moderating the potential negative effects of film violence. Only few young Indian filmgoers downplay the importance of personal and situational factors (such as parental involvement) and instead associate violent behaviour directly and immediately with violent film content. Further analysis suggests that the shared cognitions – i.e. their “theories” or everyday social explanations – regarding film violence and real violence are not a cultural invariant but largely restricted to younger and less educated Indian filmgoers as well as those from less privileged socio-economic backgrounds. Additionally, there is no evidence either that a culturally predominant cognitive style would account for those shared cognitions; rather, young Malaysian Indians display both holistic and analytic styles when thinking about mediated and real violence. Implications for film censorship and education will be briefly explored.

Keywords: Violent films, the catalyst model of violent crime, cultural cognitive theory, Malaysian Indians, aggressive behaviour

[~]Correspondence email: ramachandran.ponnann@taylors.edu.my

*Correspondence email: antoon.derycker@berjaya.edu.my

[^]Correspondence email: laiyang@taylors.edu.my

[~]Correspondence email: mohammadabeersyed@sd.taylors.edu.my

1. INTRODUCTION

Our research objective is to examine and understand the way young Malaysian Indians make sense of the relationships between, on the one hand, exposure to violence in films, and on the other, violent behaviour in their own communities. The present study derives its relevance from two related tendencies in contemporary Malaysian society. First, within Malaysia's Indian demographic, films – and violent Tamil films in particular – are a highly popular medium for information and entertainment largely because it allows for the expression of cultural identity and in-group consolidation (Eswari, 2014; Ravindran, 2008; Yesudhasan *et al.*, 2007). Secondly, there is evidence that Malaysian Indian youths tend to engage more prominently and consistently in violent behaviour than Malay, Chinese and other ethnicities in Malaysia (Amin *et al.*, 2014; Bala, 2009; Sidhu, 2005). According to Ponnann (2016), these two tendencies in behaviour have produced popular stereotypes about young Malaysian Indian filmgoers as uncritically idolizing the heroes and villains that appear in the films they watch and adopting similar gangster-like actions, attitudes and appearance among their peers and in the neighbourhoods they live.

However, from an academic point of view, these stereotypical views about onscreen (mediated) and off-screen (real) violence are simplistic and reductionist: the relationship between mediated and real violence is far more complex and also multi-factorial, i.e. no one factor (e.g. exposure to violent media content) will be able to account for every single instance of aggressive or violent behaviour (Anderson *et al.*, 2003; Lyons, 2016; Markey *et al.*; 2015). In trying to unravel the multitude of variables that explain violence, most studies to date adopt a political, socio-economic, psychological or social-cognitive perspective (e.g. Ferguson *et al.*, 2008; Lyons, 2016). By contrast, the role of culture and especially of culturally shared social cognitions has received less attention. Note that we will take “social cognitions” to refer to “how individuals perceive and interpret their social world” (Berry *et al.*, 2011: 101), i.e. the perceptions and interpretations that “individuals have about their (and others’) emotions, behaviors, thoughts, needs, values, and attitudes” (Thomas and Segal, 2006: 391).

More specifically, the current study is meant to fill the gap that exists in the literature concerning young Malaysian filmgoers' own culturally shared social cognitions – subjective (mis)perceptions, opinions, thoughts and beliefs – regarding film violence, real violence and the ways they interact. Our first research question then is to identify those cognitions, i.e. the “naïve psychology” (Heider, 1958), “everyday social explanations” (Miller, 1984) or “shared causal theories” (Wilson, 2002) of Malaysian Indian filmgoers. A second but related research question is whether or not these shared explanatory theories are in broad agreement with the empirical and experimental findings of academic research. Reference will be made in this context to Ferguson *et al.*'s (2008) catalyst model of violent crime (see Section 2.1). Note that in case these young Malaysian Indians' cognitions are different from the findings of scientific research, the question arises whether their ill-informed views themselves may function as a potential contributing factor to violent or aggressive behaviour.

Finally, the study is also interested in whether the causal theories that these youngsters construct for themselves are shared collectively or whether they are idiosyncratic for certain subgroups (for example, as defined by age or socio-economic status). In the former case, it can be hypothesized that, at least, among young Malaysian Indians, social cognitions about the mechanisms behind violence may have a strong cultural component. To examine this possibility in more detail, we will draw on Nisbett's (2003) cultural cognitive theory (see also Norenzayan and Nisbett, 2000). The following section will provide a brief outline of this theoretical framework and also show how it is connected to the catalyst model.

Our findings and argumentation will be based on a survey research design. Surveys that capture filmgoers', and more generally, media consumers', perceptions about violence, its causes and effects are useful as they may guide the formulation of policies related to such topics as film classification and censorship, television broadcast guidelines or restrictions on the import, sales and distribution of DVDs. However, we concur with Bullock and Tilley (2008) that to be successful, new policies and intervention strategies have to be adapted locally to suit the specific contexts within which youth violence occurs. To that aim, we also have to gain a deeper understanding of the way in which the perceptions themselves vary relative to certain attributes of the survey respondents. It is clear from the literature we consulted and from social commentary and public opinion in Malaysia that there exists a gap in this area. No academic research has yet been done to find out the kinds of shared causal theories that young Malaysians themselves believe in when making sense of the causes of violent behaviour among them.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 *Catalyst Model of Violent Crime*

In accounting for the incidence of violent behaviour and crime, Ferguson *et al.*'s (2008) catalyst model emphasizes biological dispositions and innate motivations but also other similarly deep-seated factors that are environmental in nature, e.g. parents' involvement or education. The effects on violent behaviour of individual biological and socio-environmental factors (e.g. impulse control, intelligence, type of residence or income level) have been amply substantiated in the literature (see, among others, Anderberg *et al.*, 2016; Christens and Speer, 2005; Machin *et al.*, 2011; Moretti *et al.*, 2005); an overview of the moderating effects of viewer characteristics and the social environment can be found in Anderson *et al.* (2003: 96–100). The catalyst model of violent crime, however, combines these factors into a broader framework of interacting variables, founded on the concept of *catalysts* or environmental strains or stressors, as can be seen in Figure 1 (see also Tan (2009: 8)).

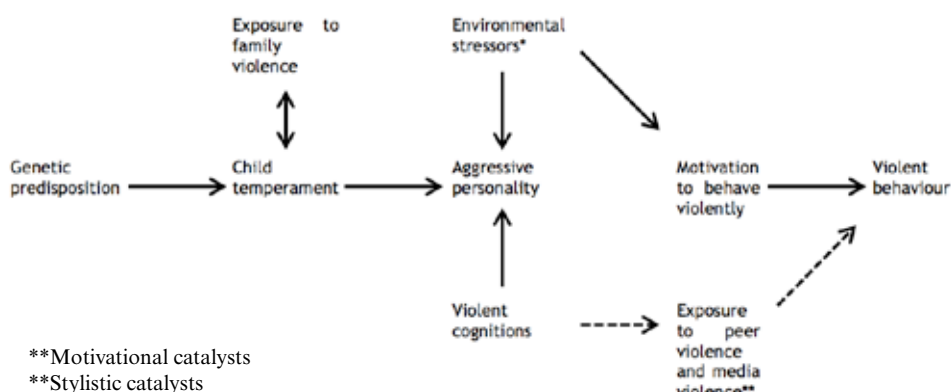


Figure 1. The catalyst model of violent crime (Ferguson et al., 2008)

On the one hand, there are personality types that are more or less prone to violence due to biological and genetic dispositions. On the other, there are environmental aspects that may moderate these comparatively invariant factors, either positively through supportive parental practices or cultural norms reinforcing self-control or negatively as in peer pressure or financial difficulties. The negative category consists of the circumstantial short-term stressors or catalysts that can increase the probability of violent behaviour, especially in individuals whose child temperament and personality already predispose them towards violence. In other words, biological factors, when combined with proximal social factors, can make a person prone to behave violently or aggressively but it is the stress from the environment that will ultimately provide the motivation to do so. The likelihood will increase when environmental stressors are dominant and/or plentiful. Under the theory, individuals who have a higher proneness to violence require fewer and/or less prominent catalysts; by contrast, others might display a comparatively much higher tolerance for potentially stressing events.

In contrast to alternative models such as the general aggression model (Anderson and Bushman, 2002), none of the relationships underlying the catalyst model imply causality, an observation that also applies to the role of film violence exposure as a short-term so-called “stylistic catalyst” (see Figure 1). Like other media, films are merely a *potential contributing factor* but do not constitute the reason or motivation for violence (Anderson et al., 2003; DeWall et al., 2012). The theory would argue that an individual with an aggressive personality or disposition towards violence might indeed act violently in response to portrayals of violence in a film but that the catalyst will have to come from elsewhere – hence, the broken lines connecting violent behaviour with film or peer violence exposure. Note that there is also an equally tentative association between violent cognitions (related to aggressive personality) and exposure to media violence. A recent longitudinal study on video games by Breuer et al. (2015) provides support for this: their research found no evidence for the selection hypothesis that more violent youth would have a preference for violent video games; rather it suggests

that intra-individual developmental change (and thus, age as its proxy variable) and inter-individual differences are among the dominant risk factors.

Within the catalyst model, our focus will be on violent cognitions and their variation among young Malaysian Indian filmgoers. Violent cognitions are conceptually similar to “aggressive thinking”, which includes “beliefs and attitudes that promote aggression” (Anderson et al., 2003: 83). Recently, Bushman’s (2016) meta-analysis of experimental, cross-sectional and longitudinal studies found that significant exposure to media violence can increase “hostile appraisals” of the world, namely that it is “a ‘meaner and scarier’ place than it is” (American College of Pediatricians, 2016: 605) as well as lead to “aggressive thoughts, angry feelings, psychological arousal”. In turn, media-influenced attitudes about violence (e.g. tolerance of the real-life use of violence) can act as powerful mediators between, for example, extensive and persistent exposure to aggressive media and certain forms of violence such as teenager dating violence (e.g. Friedlander et al., 2013). In the present study, we use the term “violent cognitions” more broadly to include forms of thinking about violence as well as people’s beliefs and attitudes that do not promote aggression or even inhibit it.

2.2. Cultural Cognitive Theory

An extended, more socially embedded notion of violent cognition can be usefully integrated with more comprehensive theories that at least partially attribute violent behaviour to social cognitions and to culture more generally. For a discussion and comparison of a number of such theories, see Kim (2012). For present purposes, it is sufficient to present the basic assumptions and core concepts of Nisbett’s (2003) cultural cognitive theory that will help us describe our respondents’ construal of the film-violence association. Note that we have chosen to work within this theory because of our interest in Malaysian Indian culture, its values, ways of seeing and practices, and especially, the collective patterns of thought and behaviour among its film-going youth. The question is how young Indian filmgoers themselves explain the violence within their communities and how much of that they attribute to exposure to film violence. Alternative theories such as social-information processing theory (Dodge et al., 1990) or social-cognitive domain theory (Turiel, 2002) either ignore or downplay the cultural factor or overstate the influence of an individual’s decision-making skills and his/her rational reasoning and personal judgement (Kim, 2012).

Nisbett’s (2003) cultural cognitive theory sets out from the premise that a person’s cultural orientation plays a role in higher-order cognitive processes. One of these processes relates to the ways in which people try and account for their actions and responses. Nisbett and Wilson (1977) distinguish the following broad types of accounts: (i) informal culturally “shared causal theories”, i.e. the “storehouse of cultural knowledge about what makes people tick” (Wilson, 2002: 107–109), (ii) observations of co-variation between one’s responses and prior conditions, (iii) idiosyncratic theories and (iv) private knowledge (thoughts, feelings and memories). Failing a ready-made explanation for a particular action or response (e.g. youth violence), culturally shared causal theories can help to make inferences about the social world but also – and

surprisingly perhaps – inferences that are more accurate than the ones generated by the other three types (Wilson, 2002: 107–109).

When applied to violence and how ordinary people interpret its underlying causes, Nisbett (2003) posits the existence of so-called “violence-endorsing cultures” as one of the theory’s core concepts and makes the basic assumption that it is cultural factors that influence habits of mind, fundamental beliefs and systems of thought, including the shared causal theories mentioned above. This culture is then transmitted from one generation to the next through children’s socialization “in which violence is a natural and integral part”; ultimately, this self-reinforcing process of intergenerational transmission “manifests in individuals’ violent behaviours” (Kim, 2012: 399). It follows that Nisbett’s theory can be regarded as an extension and further elaboration of Ferguson *et al.*’s (2008) notions of violent cognitions and family violence exposure (see Figure 1) but also more general related notions such as parenting styles, the values and skills transmitted and the degree of parental supervision (e.g. Marotz and Kupzyk, 2017: Ch. 5). Cultural cognitive theory thus provides us with a deeper and more sophisticated understanding of those factors in the catalyst model that have a potential cultural dimension.

This level of conceptual sophistication does not mean, however, that cultural cognitive theory, itself a construct emerging from within a particular culture, can be expected to account for all variation across all cultures. Ethnic and cultural affiliation remain critically important, and where relevant, will be brought to bear when discussing and interpreting the survey findings.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

To situate the current study, the literature review has been organized into two sections. We will first discuss the incidence of youth crime in Malaysia and the role attributed to film violence. The second section consists of two subsections. Given the ethnic dimension of our research, we will give a brief overview of what is known about the socio-cultural identity of young Malaysian Indians. Next, we will summarize the available literature into young Malaysian Indians’ perceptions, opinions, beliefs and thoughts about the relationship between onscreen and off-screen violence.

3.1 *Violent Films and Violent Behaviour: Facts and Figures*

It is reasonable to assume that the factors affecting youth violence among Malaysian Indians do not differ substantially from those identified in the literature to date. The same arguably holds true for the influence of exposure to media violence more specifically. Violence is the outcome of a host of biological and psychological features, perceptions and cognitions, all of which are moderated by aspects of the social context such as socio-economic status, parenting style, type of residence (e.g. neighbourhood characteristics) and culture (Anderson *et al.*, 2003: 81; Ferguson *et al.*, 2008; Nisbett, 2003). Anderson *et al.*’s (2003: 81) authoritative overview article concludes that nearly fifty years of research “reveals unequivocal evidence that media violence *increases*

the likelihood of aggressive and violent behaviors” [italics ours]; to all intents and purposes, the academic debate about the effects of mediated violence is “essentially over”. For a similar conclusion, see also the report on the impact of media use and screen time on children, adolescents and families conducted by the American College of Pediatricians (2016). The mechanisms behind the increased likelihood distinguish between immediate and delayed effects of media violence. Anderson *et al.* (2003: 94) summarize the state of knowledge as follows: “short-term [immediate] effects are thought to be due to observational learning and imitation, arousal and excitation, and priming, whereas long-term [delayed] effects are thought to be due to observational learning, automatization of aggressive schematic processing, and desensitization or emotional habituation”. The effects of film violence exposure can be a combination of both sets of theoretical explanations.

Despite the broad consensus among experts from various disciplines (such as psychology and media studies), many news practitioners, social commentators and community leaders in Malaysia tend to subscribe to a more simplistic, causal theory associating violent behaviour directly with film or media violence. In 2016, a Malaysian moneylender was shot sixteen times in broad daylight when waiting in his car at a traffic light junction in Kuala Lumpur. CCTV footage showed four young masked assailants on scooters executing the killing in what looks like a well-rehearsed live-action re-enactment from a film (Blue Global, 2016). Balraj *et al.* (2005: 33) give the example of a robber covering his face with sandalwood powder after a similar tactic was used in the Tamil film *Thirupaachi* (2005). Also, a horrendous murder scene in the action film *Saamy* (2003) is said to have shaped the real-life murder and burning of a cosmetics millionaire and her three aids at a farm in Banting in 2010 (Ponnann, 2016: 122). In light of these and similar incidents, the rise in gangsterism and violence among younger Malaysian Indians is often directly attributed to their preference for watching violent action films (Ponnann, 2016: 122), motivating newspaper headlines such as “Ban Tamil movies depicting excessive violence” (Raman, 2010).

Whether or not film violence influences the real-life violence committed by young filmgoers is not to be decided by the media or public opinion but the findings of research conducted over longer periods of time and setting out from sound psychological theories. Markey *et al.* (2015: 1) warn against confusing sensationalism with science: “caution is warranted when generalizing violent media research, conducted primarily in laboratories and via questionnaires, to societal trends in violent behaviour”. Their own longitudinal study did not find evidence that violent films – or rising trends in the violent content of films – were a contributing cause of serious violent behaviour in the United States (Markey *et al.*, 2015: 11).

Admittedly, the way in which the film-violence association is covered and represented in Malaysia’s media is understandable in light of the following observations. First, most Malaysian Indians have an almost exclusive preference for watching Tamil films from India (Ravindran, 2008). In this respect, they differ significantly from the majority of Malaysians, who enjoy a diverse range of local and international films regardless of their linguistic or ethnic background (Ponnann, 2016: 15). What is more,

for over fifteen years now, Tamil films have gained a reputation for showing excessive and graphic violence. A 2004 article in *The New Straits Times* observed that “[a]lmost all the big-budget Tamil films this season have violence as their selling point” (15 May 2004). One reviewer of *Indru* (2003) called it a “draggy movie, with too much violence” (10 January 2004). Films such as the psychological thriller *Amiyan* (2005) and more recently, the action-packed spy story *Vishwaroopam* (2013), crime film *Jagat* (2015) or the gangster-themed drama *Kabali* (2016) suggest that box-office success is largely a matter of plotlines centred on the underworld, rebellion, extremism, substance abuse, crime, violence and terrorism.

Films based on kindness, good manners, positive Tamil traditions, values or cultural legends are far less popular. When combining viewing preferences with the nature of Indian films, it follows that Malaysian Indians are more likely than others to be exposed to violent film content on a regular basis.

Secondly, prior research suggests that viewers tend to identify with aggressive perpetrators and their “overall attractiveness, power, and charisma” (Anderson *et al.*, 2003: 98), which enhances the likelihood of short-term aggressive or violent behaviours; this is especially the case if the violent portrayals themselves are life-like, vivid and impactful and the violence or aggression itself is presented as justified (Anderson *et al.*, 2003: 98). The highest grossing Indian action films typically display raw and shocking realism and rationalize the use of violence in order to further one’s aims, as in, for example, *Raman Raghav 2.0* (2016). In view of this, it is perhaps no surprise that young Malaysian Indians are at a higher risk of displaying violent behaviour. Habitual exposure to violent materials – in films, television drama series or (multiplayer online) videogames – increases the likelihood of violent behaviour, also for much younger children. Teimouri *et al.* (2014) found that it potentially affects 26 per cent of Malaysian children aged 9 to 16.

Though a higher-than-average risk does not mean that violent behaviour is inevitable, a third observation is that official statistics show that Malaysian Indian and Malaysian Indian youths are more likely to be involved in violent crimes. The Royal Malaysia Police Force defines “violent crime” as “crimes of violence that are sufficiently regular and significant in occurrence” and that include “murder, attempted murder, gang robbery with firearm, gang robbery without firearm, robbery with firearm, robbery without firearm, rape and lastly voluntarily causing hurt” (cited in Sidhu, 2005: 5). Amin *et al.* (2014) found that compared with other races and ethnicities in Malaysia, Indians make up the highest number of both victims and perpetrators. A breakdown of wanted gangsters in 2013, for example, shows that almost 72 per cent were Indians followed by 20 per cent Chinese and the remaining 8 per cent Malays or other ethnicities (Amin *et al.*, 2014: 53). According to Sidhu (2005), Indians are disproportionately involved in petty crime, gang-related activities, alcoholism and substance abuse, especially in urban areas, where there are “more opportunities” and “potential gains” due to “increasing population and migration” (Amin *et al.*, 2014: 53).

Sidhu (2005: 17) refers to the above statistics and the societal phenomena that they capture as “the Indian problem”. Though the Indian community in Malaysia is relatively small and accounts for only 7.3 per cent of the total population (National Census, 2010), Malaysian Indians consistently outnumber every other ethnicity on a large number of crime measures. As Sidhu (2005: 19–22) points out, the causal or contributing factors are complex, many and varied, but reliable research is lacking in this area.

3.2 *Malaysian Indian Youths: A Socio-Cultural Perspective*

A concise historical and cultural overview of Malaysia’s Indian communities can be found in, among others, Bala (2009). For a good comprehension of the demographic under analysis, the following facts and figures may be useful. Though almost every Indian ethnicity is represented in present-day Malaysia (e.g. Malayali or Punjabi), the majority of Malaysian Indians are Tamils, accounting for over 80% of all ethnic Indian subgroups. Initially, it was the British colonial power who brought in Indians to work as indentured labourers in the plantation states in peninsular Malaysia, then known as Malaya (e.g. Selangor and Johor); this took place largely between 1910 and 1930. Over time, however, also clerical workers – and after the Second World War – doctors, lawyers, teachers and other professionals joined the existing agricultural population. When rubber and oil palm plantations gave way to industrialization, large numbers of unskilled Malaysian Indian labourers were displaced, with many moving from the estates into the cities and growing suburbs. Rural-urban migration shifts like these happened in tandem with Malaysia’s national and economic development, modernization (e.g. housing, infrastructure and technology), improved education and urbanization.

Social life among Malaysian Indians primarily revolves around the nuclear family, which is integrated into a larger, extended family structure. Households frequently include three generations and living conditions can be crowded, especially among the rural or suburban poor. Generally, the father – and by extension, the male family or community members – are the dominant authority, determining a patriarchal structure with prescribed roles, responsibilities and forms of control (see also Sukumar *et al.* 2016: 64).

Against this background, however, younger generations of Malaysian Indians increasingly experience what Karim (2010) refers to as an “in-between” identity, caught as they are between globalization and traditional cultural values, including those enforced, modelled or upheld at home. This seems to be especially the case in urban and suburban areas. Even so, Chakraborty’s (2014: 2) interviews with *rural* Malaysian Indian youth found their identities to be similarly conflicted, but in a different way: young Tamils see themselves as being socio-culturally “at odds” with “nationalist ideologies of development and success”. They identify more strongly with their “marginalized and isolated plantation communities” and also – transnationally – India than with Malaysia; the reason is that their local communities and the Tamil-speaking parts of India engender a sense of belonging, emotional connectedness,

peacefulness and freedom that the high-technology modernity of a rapidly globalizing Malaysia fails to deliver.

Both Karim (2010) and Sukumar *et al.* (2016) emphasize the critical role played in the construction of these multiple identities by the media, which among Tamil youths explicitly includes films in their mother tongue. Young Malaysian Indians' consumption of global and international media is one of the factors that helps create a double or hybridized identity. Though Yesudhasan *et al.* (2007) refer to the positive influence of Tamil films on identification and cultural transmission among young Malaysian Indians, Sukumar *et al.* (2016: 63) found that "young Malaysian-Indians who reported higher frequency of media exposure on Tamil movies exhibited significantly a higher degree machismo and a higher degree of acceptance of violence in daily life context". We will come back to this in Section 5.

In relation to violence, Bala's (2009) portrayal of Malaysian Indians mentions a range of social problems similar to those listed at the end of the preceding section: "low income and savings", high numbers of young Malaysian Indians dropping out of school (see also Chakraborty, 2014), "low self-respect, apathy, poor parental responsibility, and weak community cooperation" and also – at a more macro-societal level of civic engagement and participation – "political powerlessness". Though these factors may help explain the high incidence of youth violence among Malaysian Indians (see Section 3.1), the role of violent cognitions and shared causal theories has remained under-researched, which brings us to the next section.

3.3 *Violent Films and Violent Behaviour: Cognitions among Malaysian Indian Youths*

Similarly, there is also a paucity of first-hand information about the opinions, views and beliefs of young Malaysian filmgoers themselves, and how they think about violence in films and its influence on youth behaviour. To our knowledge, the only references to directly address our research concerns are Balraj *et al.* (2005), Yesudhasan *et al.* (2007) and Sukumar *et al.* (2016). Since Yesudhasan *et al.* (2007) are based on Balraj *et al.* (2005), we will cite from the original report. Their qualitative study explores how Tamil films function within young Malaysian Tamils' negotiation of cultural identity; in the margin, it also reports relevant findings about their experience of film violence and how it relates to behaviour. The focus group discussions show that most participants – though proud to be Malaysians – are "unhappy about some issues related to [the] Indian community such as violence in Malaysia" (Balraj *et al.*, 2005: 18). In fact, "[m]any respondents felt that excessive violence shown in movies influence[s] ... violent behavior among Indian youth in Malaysia" (Balraj *et al.*, 2005: 31). Judging from the excerpts, their views about the association between film violence and off-screen violence seem to be largely influenced by so-called "stylistic catalysts": the use of a *parang* (machete) as seen in, for example, the action film *Sandai Kozhi* (2005), the names of gangs, the practice of "ragging" or certain styles of fighting as in *Thirupaachi* (2005). In the words of one of the focus group members, "[m]ovies give ideas to youth on violence" (Balraj *et al.*, 2005: 33).

Though this represented the majority view, the study also found that many Indian youths realize that in keeping with the findings of academic research, verbal or physical violence in films does not in itself cause violence (Balraj *et al.*, 2005: 45). Close reading of the discussion excerpts reveals that many of the participants are aware that the potential negative effect of film violence may depend – as in the catalyst model – on age, disposition and/or motivation: according to some participants, film violence is especially a problem for "kids" or "[t]eenagers who are not mature" and "criminals" (Balraj *et al.*, 2005: 32–33). Some young Malaysian Indians also draw attention to environmental stressors such as the role of "estates" or areas "famous for violence" (Balraj *et al.*, 2005: 31–33).

Interestingly, these qualitative findings are similar to the views expressed by older members of Malaysia's Indian community but with a different distribution. Focus group discussions recently conducted by Ponnann (2016: 117–123) show that older generations are more cautious about the influence of violent film content than their younger counterparts. A majority attributes only a limited effect to film violence exposure, with very few seeing it as a direct and immediate cause. In fact, there is strong awareness of the moderating effects of age, maturity, education, self-esteem (within the community's stratified class system) as well as upbringing and parental involvement and control; the participants in Ponnann's (2016) study also attribute young Indian filmgoers' violence to a youth subculture of gangsterism, substance abuse or simply "hanging out" at cinemas (e.g. causing public nuisance such as setting off fire crackers before the film starts, misbehaving and irritating other patrons or re-enactments of dialogues and scenes). Hardly anyone associates youngsters' violence or aggression with predisposition, child temperament or personality (e.g. anger as a character trait), as these concepts are used in the catalyst model (see Figure 1).

As such, both Balraj *et al.* (2005) and Yesudhasan *et al.* (2007) and Ponnann (2016) support more general studies into the cultural dimensions of the social-psychological concept of attribution and the central distinction between *personal* versus *situational attribution* (e.g. Kassin *et al.*, 2011: 112–113). Miller's (1984) study of Hindu Indians, for example, reports a culturally shared preference for attributing the occurrence of certain ordinary life events to the situational context rather than to personal disposition. Norenzayan and Nisbett (2000: 132) cite this study as evidence for the cultural variability of the fundamental attribution error, and more generally, for making a case for cultural differences in causal cognition: Asians would be leaning towards a more *holistic* cognitive style compared with the *analytic* one more typical of many Westerners (Norenzayan and Nisbett, 2000: 133–134). When explaining or justifying violent behaviour, our respondents should be more inclined to attributing the incidence of such behaviour to situational constraints (i.e. environmental stressors including exposure to film violence) than to the personal factors identified in the catalyst model (see Figure 1). One caveat is in place, however. The majority of the focus group participants in Balraj *et al.* (2005: 12) are university students: their cognitions about violence and mediated violence may not necessarily reflect the causal and other theories shared among other youngsters. Nor does the study differentiate

the university students in terms of other social dimensions (such as family income or type of residence). It is these two imbalances in the literature that the current study seeks to redress.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

The research approach consists of a survey questionnaire, which was administered in the first half of 2016 among young Malaysian Indian filmgoers. Since there is no suitable sampling frame listing all cases, recruitment involved a combination of representative and judgemental procedures, leading to a sample size of 360 youngsters living in suburban West Malaysia. All of them are regular filmgoers and members of a “habituated audience” as defined by Srinivas (2002: 175): “insiders to the culture of commercial cinema, audiences who have developed a relationship with the films based on long acquaintance with them”, or as Kumar (2015: 197) puts it, an “audience used to a certain reception mode”. Judgement sampling helps mitigate the disadvantages of not having a probability-based sample (Vogt *et al.*, 2012: 128–129). This sampling technique also enables collection of “information-rich cases”, ensuring a more in-depth analysis of the research topic compared to self-selection or snowballing (e.g. Patton, 2015: 266). Specifically, the technique allowed us to include “extreme cases”, i.e. school dropouts and youngsters with a record of aggressive or violent behaviour. Some of the respondents were, for example, recruited from designated “hot spots” – or “high-activity crime places” (Braga and Weisburd, 2010: 4). To ensure geographical representativeness, data were sourced from sites in various suburban areas according to their population size (National Census, 2010).

4.2 Instrument and Variables

A multiple-item survey questionnaire was drawn up, aimed at identifying respondents’ shared causal theories about (i) the association between film violence and real-life violence and (ii) the role and influence of parental involvement. These two dependent variables were derived from the catalyst model but as we explained in Section 2.1, the construct is more comprehensive than Ferguson *et al.*’s (2008) concept of violent cognitions. As for “parental involvement”, we will define this as the “potential [of parents] to be important moderators of the effects of media violence” (Anderson *et al.*, 2003: 99); it thus refers to the interpersonal interactions with parents that shape youngsters’ attitudes and beliefs. In our study, it is not the parental involvement as such that is in focus but youngsters’ collectively shared cognitions about the role and influence of parental involvement.

The variables were operationalized into a set of eight questionnaire statements which respondents assessed along a five-point Likert scale, with 1 = “strongly disagree”, 2 = “disagree”, 3 = “neutral”, 4 = “agree” and 5 = “strongly agree”. Note that responses are meant to capture the respondents’ shared cognitions – their “naïve psychology” – rather than their factual knowledge. The eight-item survey is reliable, with a

Cronbach’s alpha of 0.717 for the overall instrument, which demonstrates adequate internal consistency of the measures (Jackson, 2015). Given our research focus on social cognitions, shared causal theories and culture rather than subjective attitudes or evaluations of violence, we did not use existing measures such as the Violence scale of the Revised Measures of Criminal Attitudes and Associates (MCAA-R-V) or the Criminal Attitudes to Violence scale (CAVS) because of their lower validity (for a discussion, see Nunes *et al.*, 2014).

Respondents were also asked to give information about certain demographic and socio-economic attributes, which were the independent variables in the study: age and gender, highest educational qualification, type of residence and family income level. Their selection was based on a review of the violence literature (e.g. Anderberg *et al.*, 2016; Chung and Steinberg, 2006; Fagan and Wright, 2012; Kvalseth, 2006; Machin *et al.*, 2011; Moretti *et al.*, 2005). Note that Malaysia’s official definition of youth ranges from 15 to 30 years of age (Ministry of Youth and Sports, 2015: 10). Though self-administered completion of the survey was the norm, enumerators had the option of meeting respondents face-to-face, going through the questions together and clarifying issues where necessary (Vogt *et al.*, 2012: 20).

4.3 Data Analysis

Questionnaire responses were analysed with SPSS 22.0 to identify interactions and find statistical significance. Frequency distributions, means, modes and medians were calculated for all variables. We also performed correlation analyses to test relationships between the independent and dependent variables, followed by regression analyses to determine the explanatory and/or predictive power of the socio-demographic attributes identified in this study.

4.4 Sample Characteristics

The sample characteristics have been summarized in Table 1.

As Table 1 shows, the respondents are predominantly male, aged 25–30, with either a secondary-school certificate or undergraduate degree as their highest educational attainment. A majority of the survey sample live in a community flat, a hostel or temporary housing compared with fewer in terrace-gated communities, condominiums or bungalows (64.0 per cent and 36.0 per cent respectively). Regardless of type of residence, 59.7 per cent are on family incomes of more than RM3,000 per month.

Table 1. Sample characteristics

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Value</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Gender	Male	266	73.9
	Female	94	26.1
Age	Below 15	1	0.6
	16–20	41	11.4
	21–24	18	4.7
	25–30	251	69.7
	Above 31	49	13.6
Education	School dropout	19	5.3
	Primary school	3	0.8
	Secondary school	155	43.2
	Undergraduate	145	40.4
	Postgraduate	37	10.3
Type of residence	Temporary housing	81	22.6
	Community flat	143	39.9
	Hostel	5	1.4
	Terrace-gated community	111	31.0
	Condominium/bungalow	18	5.0
Family income per month	Less than RM1,000	18	5.0
	RM1,000–RM3,000	116	32.5
	RM3,001–5,000	148	41.5
	RM5,001 and above	65	18.2
	No income	10	2.8

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Cognitions about Film Violence and Parental Involvement

One of the main findings is that young Malaysian Indians do not subscribe to theories that attribute real-life violence directly to film violence. The mean scores – both composite and single-item ones – given in Table 2 suggest that respondents are aware that both phenomena are connected but perhaps only weakly and not in a direct causal way.

Table 2. Descriptives for film violence

<i>Variable</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N valid</i>
Cognitions about film violence	3.16	0.54	
1. Youths generally prefer to watch violent films to any other type of films.	3.26	0.86	359
2. The more violence the film portrays, the more interesting the film becomes.	3.93	1.03	359
3. Violence and fighting scenes in films are being duplicated in real life.	3.00	0.79	358
4. Youths' portrayal of violent characteristics in society is some kind of self-protection.	2.49	0.96	358
5. Hitting a girl/woman is normal, just as it is shown in films.	3.13	1.16	358

Moreover, as the *M* and *SD* values in Table 2 show, responses cluster around “neither agree nor disagree”, with few outliers; this indicates that most young Malaysian Indians recognize the multivariate complexity behind youth violence and aggressive behaviour. Their cognitions are thus largely in accordance with the catalyst model and the literature that we reviewed. From a cognitive point of view, our respondents' beliefs can be considered “self-enhancing” (Wilson, 2011: 15). If watching a violent film need not lead to violent behaviour or even violent cognitions, then the main motivation has to come from elsewhere. This realization may inhibit violent behaviour as it helps youth understand their own responsibility despite the presence of short-lived or longer-term environmental stressors. By contrast, the belief that film violence *causes* violence may lead to a “self-defeating cycle” (Wilson, 2011: 15), in which exposure to violence in films will trigger violence and even help rationalize it.

Though they adopt a theory that is more accurate than the one positing direct causality, most Malaysian Indian respondents seem to agree that it is the youths themselves who “choose” violence as a legitimate, calculated or even default course of action in certain situations. There is strong disagreement ($M = 2.49$, $SD = 0.96$) that violence would somehow be justifiable as self-defence in the face of a physical threat or attack (Item No. 4). The implication might be that our respondents lend more weight to the personal factors contributing to violence than the situational or contextual ones; also, they may fail to distinguish between immediate and delayed effects of mediated violence. Admittedly, the precise interplay between those two categories, on the one hand, and viewer characteristics and social environments, on the other, is perhaps not widely understood outside the academic community. It is clear, for example, that the respondents are not familiar with the psychological processes or models that explain media effects. The potential “duplication” in real-life of film fights or violence (Item

No. 3) only elicited neutral responses ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 0.79$). This may point to a lack of awareness that imitation and observational learning respectively are powerful – often automatic, non-conscious – mechanisms behind both immediate reactive behaviours and delayed or more ingrained ones (Anderson *et al.*, 2003: 94–95); alternatively, the score may also reflect the composition of the sample and especially its variation in terms of educational attainment or type of residence (see Table 1).

In view of this, it is unlikely that young Malaysian Indians would favour more stringent censorship, more restrictive rating systems or film bans for the kinds of violent action or gangster films that they watch. After all, there is rather strong agreement (Item No. 2: $M = 3.93$, $SD = 1.03$) that violent films are more interesting than other genres (e.g. romance or adventure). One of the reasons is that “[m]edia violence is exciting (arousing) for most youth”, creating a physiological and psychological state of readiness that “can increase aggression” (Anderson *et al.*, 2003: 95).

Moving on to parental involvement, Anderson *et al.*'s (2003) discussion of the relevant literature concludes that parents play an important part in mitigating the effects of media violence. The influence of what parents do (behaviour) rather than who they are (attributes) has been corroborated time and again in systematic reviews and new studies. A recent review of the literature concludes that parents' behaviour (e.g. their own “screen time” and viewing habits) significantly influences youth's aggressive behaviour and violence (American College of Pediatricians, 2016). As can be concluded from Table 3, the respondents in our sample do not hold views that run counter to these key research findings.

Table 3. Descriptives for parental involvement

<i>Variable</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N valid</i>
Cognitions about parental involvement	3.71	0.66	
6. Parents should monitor their children's exposure to violent media contents.	4.31	0.97	360
7. Youths watching violent films would downplay their reactions to violent scenes when watching films with parents.	3.59	0.86	360
8. Watching films at home prevents youths from overreacting to violent scenes.	3.23	0.86	360

Though they may be unfamiliar with the empirical details or psychological processes involved, young Malaysian Indians are in agreement that parental interventions moderate between film violence and youth violence ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 0.66$). Most of them believe that parental supervision or interaction will prevent immediate reactive violent behaviour ($M = 3.59$, $SD = 0.86$) – see Item No. 7.

This shared belief is potentially self-enhancing in the sense that it corresponds to the findings of research: parents can shape teenagers' and young adults' cognitions by “commenting regularly and critically about realism, justification [or (in)appropriateness of media violence], and other factors that could influence [observational] learning” (Anderson *et al.*, 2003: 99). Parents can, of course, also limit their children's access to violent media content (Anderson *et al.*, 2003: 100). Deutsch *et al.* (2012), for example, found that low parental control (e.g. over viewing habits) contributes to violent behaviour among youth. Young Malaysian Indians are sufficiently aware of this, and are in agreement that parents should set boundaries ($M = 4.31$, $SD = 0.97$) – see Item No. 6.

Taking Tables 2 and 3 together, the shared causal cognitions about film and real-life violence suggest a balance of personal and situational factors; this may have an empowering effect in that young Malaysian Indians implicitly acknowledge their own responsibility in displaying violent behaviour or not. The findings about parental involvement, however, seem to attribute a greater role to contextual factors and social environment. Paradoxically, young Malaysian Indians realize that violent behaviour involves personal judgement but at the same time, seem to transfer the responsibility for monitoring or preventing that behaviour to parents. This then would imply an implicit preference for a more authoritarian-type, coercive parenting style, with strict monitoring, supervision and recognition and correction of antisocial behaviour (Marotz and Kupzyk, 2017: 135; Ritzer, 2016: 169). This in itself may point to a lack of self-control, which might in turn explain the higher likelihood of criminal and deviant acts – as in Gottfredson and Hirshi's (1990) self-control theory of crime. However, there may also be a cultural cognitive dimension. In explaining violent behaviour, a holistic cognitive style combined with an implicitly violence-endorsing culture will privilege environmental stressors over personal factors (see Sections 2.1 and 3.3); this orientation then may go hand in hand with expectations that others (or external forces) are responsible for removing or mitigating those stressors.

Speculatively, our young Malaysian Indians' responses may partly derive from their familiarity with the dominant, often punitive parenting style prevalent among many Asian Indians (in the absence of reliable Malaysian research into the psychology and socio-cultural identity of young Malaysian Indians (see the literature reviewed in Inman *et al.*, 2007). Hoeve *et al.*'s (2009) meta-analysis, among many others, and a recent overview of the evidence conducted by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2015) provide evidence that an authoritarian parenting style may be less successful, however, in reducing the likelihood of youth violence or aggression. Moreover, if this style involves corporal punishment, violence or abuse, youngsters will be “socialized to use violence as a rightful means to resolve conflicts and achieve their goals” (Kim, 2012: 402). More effective results can be expected from parenting styles based on better and closer parent-child relationships. Building such stronger bonds requires interpersonal trust, connection and involvement (Wright and Fitzpatrick, 2006). It cannot be inferred from the questionnaire data, however, whether young Malaysian Indians believe that such tighter relationships with parents help moderate the

influence of film violence. In fact, the literature reviewed by Inman *et al.* (2007) seems to suggest that at least among Asian Indians in the United States, developing close interpersonal parent-child relationships is secondary to promoting bonds at the level of the (extended) family.

5.2. Cognitions about Film Violence and Parental Involvement as a Function of Respondents' Attributes

In order to identify distinct groups within the sample of young Malaysian Indians, the above findings were cross-tabulated with respondents' demographic and socio-economic attributes (see Table 4).

Table 4. Cross-tabulation of cognitions about film violence and parental involvement by age, education, type of residence and family income per month

Variable		Cognitions about			
		Film violence		Parental involvement	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Age	Below 15	3.00	1.13	3.67	0.94
	16–20	3.74	0.59	3.07	0.70
	21–24	3.30	0.42	3.67	0.91
	25–30	3.27	0.47	3.81	0.58
	Above 31	2.93	0.64	3.73	0.67
Education	School dropout	3.13	0.44	3.91	0.37
	Primary school	3.95	0.68	3.56	1.07
	Secondary school	3.30	0.41	3.87	0.50
	Undergraduate	3.10	0.62	3.60	0.77
	Postgraduate	3.12	0.62	3.40	0.73
Type of residence	Temporary housing	3.21	0.45	3.82	0.58
	Community flat	3.27	0.43	3.89	0.51
	Hostel	3.76	0.75	3.80	0.51
	Terrace-gated community	2.95	0.66	3.39	0.77
	Condominium/bungalow	3.31	0.48	3.72	0.70
Family income	Less than RM1,000	2.93	0.62	3.20	0.91
	RM1,000–RM3,000	3.24	0.50	3.83	0.60
	RM3,001–5,000	3.26	0.51	3.82	0.55
	RM5,001 and above	2.94	0.51	3.49	0.76
	No income	2.59	0.58	3.03	0.64

Regression analyses revealed statistically significant differences for all attributes. The following values were found: age (Welch's $F(4, 7.33) = 7.67, p < 0.050$), education (Welch's $F(4, 13.95) = 3.58, p < 0.050$), type of residence (Welch's $F(4, 25.40) = 5.56, p < 0.010$) and family income ($F = 8.90, p < 0.005$).

Post-hoc tests indicate the existence of meaningful subgroupings within the sample, allowing us to make the following observations.

A first important finding is that cognitions about the effect of onscreen violence on real violence become more nuanced and less absolute with age (with statistically significant differences between respectively 16–20 and 21–30 and between 21–30 and above 30), higher levels of education (e.g. undergraduate), higher family income (RM5,000 per month or more) and a higher-quality, more expensive type of residence (e.g. gated community). In other words, it is especially the younger Malaysian Indians aged 16–20, namely those in secondary school or with only a secondary-school certificate, that express the strongest views about a potential causal relationship between film violence and real-life violence and this at the expense of other personal or situational factors ($M = 3.74, SD = 0.59$). In this respect, our survey findings are in line with Balraj *et al.* (2005); their focus groups were made up of undergraduate students, i.e. young Malaysian Indians aged 18–20, with only a secondary-school certificate, who subscribed to equally strong views about the film-violence association (see Section 3.3). Note that in our study, these strong cognitions are even more pronounced among those who live in cheaper community flats or low-cost public housing.

Secondly, theories about the role and influence of parents are not shared across all categories of respondents either. Especially those aged 16–20 feel that parents should *not* control their children's viewing habits and that parents are *unlikely* to influence their reactions ($M = 3.07, SD = 0.70$). Typically, these teens and young adults do not assign much positive influence to parental involvement or control – a shared cognition that is potentially self-defeating. They are most likely to perceive and even experience violence as a natural and integral part of their youth culture, unhindered by parental interference. Interestingly, it is the school dropouts, respondents aged 20 and above and/or those housed in community flats who value the role of parental supervision the most, perhaps due to the benefit of hindsight or because they have become parents themselves. In terms of family income, the same distinction can be noticed as for the respondents' cognitions about film violence with those in the RM1,000–5,000 income bracket expressing stronger views about the helpful role of parenting than those whose monthly family income is outside that range.

Theoretically, our study was informed by the catalyst model in combination with cultural cognitive theory. It emerges, however, that age and socio-economic status are more salient factors in predicting variability in shared cognitions than culture per se. Though the 360 respondents belong to the same Malaysian Indian culture, not all of them share the same causal theory. The present study thus supports Kim's (2012: 400) evaluation of cultural cognitive theory as overstating the role of culture. The influence of culture on cognition and behaviour is “not cohesive and homogeneous” and “there exist considerable individual differences in the manifestation of one's cultural

orientation” (Kim, 2012: 400). Those manifestations or expressions are not predictable but situationally contingent. In regard to violent behaviour and social cognitions, the observation that “individuals’ behaviours are more than a simple manifestation of a particular cultural system” (Kim, 2012: 400) thus meshes well with the catalyst model’s recognition of the influence of within-person variation and environmental contexts. Moreover, given the importance of age (and, by proxy, maturity) and education, the findings suggest that more harmful or self-defeating views about film violence and parental influence may be developmental rather than fixed. If we interpret the cross-sectional data as an estimate of longitudinal correlations, it seems that as young Malaysian Indians grow older, obtain academic qualifications, leave home and become financially independent, most of them move from a “self-defeating simplification” of the effects of mediated violence to what can be referred to as “self-enhancing realism”.

As regards the culture-specific differences between holistic and analytic cognitive styles, we hypothesized at the end of Section 3.3 that young Malaysian Indians would be more holistic in their interpretation of violent behaviour, and attach more weight to environmental stressors than personal judgement and decisions. There is no straightforward evidence to support this, however, strengthening Kim’s theory-based conclusion that “the influence of culture is neither deterministic nor uniform” (2012: 402). The importance assigned to parental control and involvement points to a more holistic understanding of the media-violence relationship. The fact that most young Malaysian Indians give neutral responses may also signal that they espouse a more balanced and thus holistic theory about youth violence and film violence. On the other hand, they also recognize the role of personal judgement and decision-making as in Turiel’s (2002) social-cognitive domain theory: youth violence is not just a form of self-protection – triggered by external circumstances – but also a strategy aimed at achieving goals or resolving conflicts. Young Malaysian Indians are also sceptical that exposure to film violence would somehow lead to the imitation and justification of violence. These two observations are more typical of an analytic thinking style. In all likelihood, their social cognitions are a combination of both thinking styles, with some individual-level variation.

6. CONCLUSION

Cinema is “an especially powerful visual medium because a film can create a total world for its audience” (Rose, 2012: 151). The way filmgoers read and consume a film’s “total world” constitutes an important aspect of the cognitive psychology of mass communication: “our experiences with media affect the way we acquire knowledge about the world, and how this knowledge influences our attitudes and behaviour” (Harris and Sanborn, 2014: 1). Indian films, and Tamil films especially, have attracted a great deal of scholarship not only into the socio-cultural role that they play in various diasporic communities but also because of their widely debated negative impact on young viewers and filmgoers (Balraj *et al.*, 2005: 1–2; Ponnann, 2016; Ravindran, 2008). In multi-cultural Malaysia, it is especially Indian youths that

display disproportionately more violent or deviant behaviour than other ethnicities (see, however, the *Indeks Belia Malaysia 2015* report (Youth Development Research Institute of Malaysia, 2015) for a more nuanced interpretation of this statistic). Yet, it does not mean that young Malaysian Indians’ informal theories about mediated violence would justify the use of violence. News media views and public perceptions are largely based on the observation of co-variation, namely increased violence in Indian film content and rising violent crime among Indians; as was observed in Section 2, research shows that such theories tend to be inaccurate. In fact, one of the major findings of our study is that young Malaysian Indians do *not* subscribe to theories that associate violent behaviour directly or immediately with the violent content of films. Rather, their beliefs are contingent and tentative: film violence is merely a potential contributing factor. As such, young Malaysian Indians’ views are in keeping with the catalyst model and the academic literature, also with respect to the constructive role played by parents.

Even so, a sizeable proportion of respondents do regard film violence as a cause of youth violence and underestimate the moderating influence of parents. This “naïve psychology” is largely restricted to younger and less highly educated Malaysian Indians as well as those from less privileged socio-economic backgrounds. Our study suggests that the young filmgoers most at risk of the negative influence of film violence are also most likely to share social cognitions that such direct and immediate influence exists, despite extensive evidence to the contrary; ironically, the young filmgoers most likely to benefit from parental involvement are also those that do not think such involvement matters. We can thus speculate that this subcategory includes not only potential perpetrators of violent crime but also future victims (see also Amin *et al.*, 2014: 53). In light of the literature, their shared cognitive theories are actually misconceptions, and as such, can be considered unhelpful in addressing the underlying issues. Clearly, further study is required.

Arguably, the mere existence of a shared but partially flawed set of causal explanations among young Malaysian Indians can function as a potential *catalyst* or environmental stressor itself, facilitating the transition from passive consumption of mediated violence to active engagement in real violence. Additionally, the (mis)conceptions that are prevalent among many young Malaysian Indians can act as a form of *self-justification* and rationalization, blinding youngsters to the many personal and/or situational factors behind violent behaviour. The combined effect of both is a self-reinforcing vicious cycle that rules out change in the film-going practices and related behaviours among the youths affected. In this sense, our findings lend support to the claims made in Nisbett’s cultural cognitive theory, namely that cultural systems including those that interpret and understand violence in society, are “self-reinforcing” and “homeostatic” (Nisbett, 2003: xx). Similarly, if the same cultural cognitions, beliefs and attitudes prevail among government authorities and community leaders, existing interventions and initiatives will ultimately fail in their attempt to deter, curb and prevent youth violence in society.

The survey data suggest that when it comes to explaining violence, young Malaysian Indians are not an undifferentiated social category but one that is made up of distinct groups in terms of age, educational attainment and socio-economic status. This finding means that there is a need for government and community-based intervention strategies that cater to these different groups. Given the popularity and cultural significance of films in Malaysia's Indian communities, it is unlikely that a "one-size-fits-all" solution will be effective. Where new forms of censorship are called for, the challenge will be to design a practicable framework that caters to the distinct audiences; this will require a balanced assessment of the risks of a continued negative impact on society, especially at the micro-level of neighbourhoods, entertainment districts and known "hot spots".

Another avenue for change consists in raising awareness about the causes of violence and more training in the moral and other value systems that ultimately underpin prosocial behaviour. Since our study revealed that the majority of Malaysian Indian youths recognize the mitigating influence of parents, it would make sense for new strategies to actively engage parents' right from the start. In a way, it is hopeful that older respondents with a secondary-school certificate and even school dropouts realize the importance of parental interventions (e.g. restricted access to violent films or shared viewing combined with critical comments and discussion). It is especially those aged 16–20 who glorify film violence, relate real-life violence to film content and tend to downplay the beneficial role of parents. In light of this, there is a case to be made for media awareness training in Malaysia's (vernacular) schools and even higher education curricula – a recommendation that is frequently made in the literature (e.g. Friedlander *et al.*, 2013).

One limitation of the current study is the small number of factors rather than the full range identified in the catalyst model, and related, the small number of questionnaire items. Also, the complex interactions among the variables have been left unexplored. An obvious avenue for future research would be to integrate more variables from the catalyst model and to study their mutual relationships. On the basis of the literature, it might be useful to look at, for example, parenting style and youth violence or delinquency relative to neighbourhood (cf. Chung and Steinberg, 2006) or ethnic and cultural affiliation (cf. Deutsch *et al.*, 2012). In regard to the latter, Anderson *et al.* (2003: 99) point out that "the full effects of culture and society [on violence] are not yet well understood" and that this is partly due to "the lack of research in non-Western countries". It is hoped that the present study into Indian youth in Malaysia has gone some way towards remedying that lack and will encourage future research into the social cognitions about violence and the role of mediated violence in particular.

Open Access: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC-BY 4.0) which permits any use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author(s) and the source are credited.

Acknowledgements: The research was supported by a grant (TRGS/MFS/2/2014/SOC/007) from Taylor's University, Subang Jaya, Malaysia.

REFERENCES

- Allen, J., & Anderson, C. (forthcoming). Aggression and violence: Definitions and distinctions. In P. Sturme (Ed.), *The Wiley handbook of aggression and violence*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley. Retrieved from <http://public.psych.iastate.edu/caa/abstracts/2015-2019/17AA2.pdf>
- Anderberg, D., Rainer, H., Wadsworth, J., & Wilson, T. (2015). Unemployment and domestic violence: Theory and evidence. *The Economic Journal*, 126(597), 1947–1979.
- Anderson, C., & Bushman, B. (2002). Human aggression. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 53(1), 27–51.
- Anderson, C., Berkowitz, L., Donnerstein, E., Huesmann, L., Johnson, J., Linz, D., Malmuth, N., & Wartella, E. (2003). The influence of media violence on youth. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 4(3), 81–110.
- American College of Pediatricians (2016). The impact of media use and screen time on children, adolescents, and families. Retrieved from <https://www.acped.org/the-college-speaks/position-statements/parenting-issues/the-impact-of-media-use-and-screen-time-on-children-adolescents-and-families>
- Amin, M. B., Rahim, M. K., & Geshina, A. M. S. (2014). A trend analysis of violent crimes in Malaysia. *Health and the Environment Journal*, 5(2), 41–56.
- Bala, P. (2009). Malaysian Indians. In T. Gall (Ed.), *Worldmark Encyclopedia of Cultures and Daily Life* (2nd ed.). Stamford, CT: Cengage Learning. Retrieved from <http://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/malaysian-indians>
- Balraj, S., Pandian, A., Prasad, N. V., & Ravindran, G. (2005). *Cinema and Tamil diaspora: Exploring the negotiations in the diasporic space by the Tamil cinema audience in Malaysia*. USM Short Term Research Project No. 304/PCOMM/635036. Penang, Malaysia: Universiti Sains Malaysia.
- Berry, J., Poortinga, Y., Breugelmans, S., Chasiotis, A., & Sam, D. (2011). *Cross-cultural psychology: Research and applications*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Blue Global. (2016, July 27). 2016 – Malaysia – Moneylender shot 16 times in broad daylight @ Setapak, KL – 27/7/16 [Video file]. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Enj0F4ey1Hs>
- Braga, A., & Weisburd, D. (2010). *Policing problem places: Crime hot spots and effective prevention*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Breuer, J., Vogelsang, J., Quandt, T., & Festl, R. (2015). Violent video games and physical aggression: Evidence for a selection effect among adolescents. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, 4(4), 305–328.
- Bullock, K., & Tilley, N. (2008). Understanding and tackling gang violence. *Crime Prevention and Community Safety*, 10, 36–47.
- Bushman, B. (2016). Violent media and hostile appraisals: A meta-analytic review. *Aggressive Behavior*, 42(6), 605–613.
- Chakraborty, K. (2014). Oil palm plantations, migration and Indian youth culture in

- contemporary Malaysia. *Asia Research Brief*, 10: 1–2.
- Christens, B., & Speer, P. (2006). Predicting violent crime using urban and suburban densities. *Behaviour and Social Issues*, 14(2), 113–127.
- Chung, H., & Steinberg, L. (2006). Relations between neighborhood factors, parenting behaviours, peer deviance, and delinquency among serious juvenile offenders. *Developmental Psychology*, 42(2), 319–331.
- Deutsch, A., Crocket, L., Wolff, J., & Russell, S. (2012). Parent and peer pathways to adolescent delinquency: Variations by ethnicity and neighborhood context. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 41(8), 1078–1094.
- DeWall, C., Anderson, C., & Bushman, B. (2012). Aggression. In I. Weiner (Ed.), *Handbook of psychology, Vol. 5: Personality and social psychology* (2nd ed.) (pp. 449–466). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Dodge, K., Bates, J., & Pettit, G. (1990). Mechanisms in the cycle of violence. *Science*, 250(4988), 1678–1683.
- Eswari, C. (2014). Role of television in the formation of transcultural identities. *SEARCH: The Journal of the South East Asia Research Centre for Communications and Humanities*, 6(1), 25–39.
- Fagan, A., & Wright, E. (2011). The effects of neighborhood context on youth violence and delinquency: Does gender matter? *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 10(1), 64–82.
- Ferguson, C., Rueda, S., Cruz, A., Ferguson, D., Fritz, S., & Smith, S. (2008). Violent video games and aggression: Causal relationship or byproduct of family violence and intrinsic violence motivation? *Criminal Justice and Behaviour*, 35(3), 311–332.
- Friedlander, L., Connolly, J., Pepler, D., & Craig, W. (2013). Extensiveness and persistence of aggressive media exposure as longitudinal risk factors for teen dating violence. *Psychology of Violence*, 3(4), 310–322.
- Gottfredson, M., & Hirschi, T. (1990). *A general theory of crime*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Harris, R., & Sanborn, F. (2014). *A cognitive psychology of mass communication* (6th ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Heider, F. (1958). *The psychology of interpersonal relations*. New York, NY: Wiley.
- Hoeve, M., Semon Dubas, J., Eichelsheim, V., Van der Laan, P., Smeenk, W., & Gerris, J. (2009). The relationship between parenting and delinquency: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 37(6), 749–775.
- Inman, A., Howard, E., Beaumont, R., & Walker, J. (2007). Cultural transmission: Influence of contextual factors in Asian Indian immigrant parents' experiences. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 54(1), 93–100.
- Jackson, S. (2003). *Research methods and statistics* (1st ed.). Australia: Thomson/Wadsworth.
- Karim, H. A. (2010). *Globalisation, "in-between" identities and shifting values: Young multiethnic Malaysians and media consumption* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from <https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/8841>
- Kassin, S., Fein, S., & Markus, H. (2011). *Social psychology* (8th ed.). Stamford, CT: Cengage.
- Kim, K. (2012). The role of culture in theories of the intergenerational transmission of violence. *Child and Family Social Work*, 17(4), 395–405.
- Kumar, A. (2015). The aesthetics of pirate modernities: Bhojpuri cinema and the underclasses. In R. Kaur & P. Dave-Mukherji (Eds.), *Arts and aesthetics in a globalizing world* (pp. 185–204). London, UK: Bloomsbury.
- Kvalseth, J. (2003). A note on the effects of population density and unemployment on urban crime. *Criminology*, 15(1), 105–110.
- Lyons, C. (2016). Media violence. In *Issues in Media: Selections from CQ Researcher edited by CQ Researcher* (pp. 137–161). Los Angeles: Sage.
- Machin, S., Marie, O., & Vujić, S. (2011). The crime reducing effect of education. *The Economic Journal*, 121(552), 463–484.
- Markey, P., French, J., & Markey, C. (2015). Violent movies and severe acts of violence: Sensationalism versus science. *Human Communication Research*, 41(2), 155–173.
- Marotz, L., & Kupzyk, S. (2017). *Parenting today's children: A developmental perspective*. Boston, MA: Cengage Learning.
- Miller, J. (1984). Culture and the development of everyday social explanation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 46(5), 961–978.
- Ministry of Youth and Sports (2015). *Dasar belia Malaysia*. Putrajaya, Malaysia: Ministry of Youth and Sports.
- Moretti, M., Catchpole, E., & Odgers, C. (2005). The dark side of girlhood: Recent trends, risk factors and trajectories to aggression and violence. *Canadian Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 14(1), 21–25.
- National Census (2010). *Population distribution and basic demographic characteristic report 2010* (Updated 5 August 2011). Retrieved from <http://www.statistics.gov.my>
- Nisbett, R. (2003). *The geography of thought: How Asians and Westerners think differently . . . and why*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Nisbett, R., & Wilson, T. (1977). Telling more than we can know: Verbal reports on mental processes. *Psychological Review*, 84(3), 231–259.
- Norenzayan, A., & Nisbett, R. (2000). Culture and causal cognition. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 9(4), 132–135.
- Nunes, K., Hermann, C., Maimone, S., & Woods, M. (2015). Thinking clearly about violent cognitions: Attitudes may be distinct from other cognitions. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 30(8), 1322–1347.
- Patton, M. (2015). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Ponnann, R. (2016). *Violence among Generation Y movie goers: A case study of youths living in selected urban peripherals in West Malaysia* (TRGS Report No. MFS/2/2014/SOC/007). Unpublished manuscript, Taylor's University, Subang Jaya, Malaysia.
- Raman, A. (2010, September 23). Ban Tamil movies depicting excessive violence – community leaders. *The Star Online*. Retrieved from <http://www.thestar.com.my/>

- news/nation/2010/09/23/ban-violent-tamil-movies-board-told/
- Ravindran, G. (2008). Malaysian Tamils and transnational Tamil cinema: Diasporic identities, “crisis heterotopia” and “aura”. *Jurnal Skrin Malaysia*, 5(2), 1–17.
- Ritzer, G. (2016). *Essentials of sociology* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Rose, G. (2012). *Visual methodologies: An introduction to researching with visual materials*. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Sidhu, A. S. (2005). The rise of crime in Malaysia: An academic and statistical analysis. *Journal of the Kuala Lumpur Royal Malaysia Police College*, No. 4, 1–18.
- Srinivas, L. (2002). The active audience: Spectatorship, social relations and the experience of cinema in India. *Media, Culture & Society*, 24(2), 155–173.
- Sukumar, K., Kesaprakorn, P., & Naigowit, T. (2016). The relationships among young Malaysian-Indian’s self- perceived family communication pattern, media exposure to Tamil movies, and their attitude and belief toward violence. *BU Academic Review*, 15(1): 62–85.
- Tan, M. (2009). *Model behavior: A comparison of models explaining how video game violence affects aggression* (Unpublished master’s dissertation). Retrieved from <http://essay.utwente.nl/59614/>
- Teimouri, M., Hassan, M. S., Bolong, J., Daud, A., Yussuf, Z., & Adzharuddin, N. A. (2014). What is upsetting our children? *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 155, 411–416.
- Thomas, J., & Segal, D. (2006). *Comprehensive handbook of personality and psychopathology, personality and everyday functioning*. New York, NY: Wiley.
- Turiel, E. (2002). *The culture of morality: Social development, context, and conflict*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Vogt, W., Gardner, D., & Haeffele, L. (2012). *‘When’ to use ‘what’ research design*. New York: The Guildford Press.
- WHO (World Health Organization). 2015. Preventing Youth Violence: An Overview of the Evidence. Geneva: WHO.
- Wilson, T. (2002). *Strangers to ourselves: Discovering the adaptive unconscious*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Wilson, T. (2011). *Redirect: The surprising new science of psychological change*. New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company.
- Wright, D., & Fitzpatrick, K. (2006). Social capital and adolescent violent behavior: Correlates of fighting and weapon use among secondary school students. *Social Forces*, 84(3), 1435–1453.
- Yesudhasan, T. J., Prasad, N. V., & Balraj, S. (2007). Consumption of Tamil cinema in Malaysia: An analysis of Malaysian Tamil youth audiences. *Jurnal Skrin Malaysia*, 4: 19–30.
- Youth Development Research Institute of Malaysia (2015). *Index belia Malaysia 2015 (IBM '15)*. Putrajaya, Malaysia: Ministry of Youth and Sports.

Dr. Ramachandran Ponnann is Associate Professor at the School of Communication, Taylor’s University, Malaysia. He teaches media law, broadcasting and research methodology. His research interest is in broadcasting, audience and new media.

Dr. Antoon De Rycker is Head of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Berjaya University College, Kuala Lumpur. His main research is situated at the nexus of discourse analysis, social practice theory and a range of socially constructed phenomena such as crisis or the challenges of doing doctoral research.

Dr. Yang Lai Fong is a senior lecturer at the School of Communication, Taylor’s University, Malaysia. Currently she teaches Communication Theory to undergraduates, and Research Methodology at graduate level. Her areas of research include media and ethnicity, media and diplomacy, political communication, and media sociology.

Mohammad Abeer Syed, MA worked as a graduate research assistant on various projects at the School of Communication, Taylor’s University, Malaysia (2015–2017).

- This page intentionally left blank -