



## Media Exposure and Fear About Crime: An Application of Mediated Fear Model

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### Abstract

Social behavior can be troubled by the constant concern of crime. Research on the relationship between traditional media crime exposure, social media crime videos, and fear about the crime is scarce. The present study is designed to investigate whether social media exposure, TV news crime viewing, crime drama exposure is directly or indirectly associated to fear about crime. The theoretical framework of the study is based on the mediated fear model and cultivation theory. A sample of 371 university students was selected through a convenience sampling technique. SPSS 25 was used to analyze the data and Model 4 of Process Macro was used to examine the mediating role of the cognitive component of fear of crime (perceived seriousness, perceived risk, and perceived control). The results show that television news crime viewing, crime drama, and social media crime video exposure is positively associated with fear about crime. Moreover, three cognitive components of fear of crime played a mediatory role between traditional media exposure and fear of crime. In addition to this, the relationship between social media crime video exposure and fear about crime was mediated by the cognitive component of fear of crime.

**Keywords:** Crime news; Television; Social media; Fear; Mediated fear model.

### 1. Introduction

Crime related stories are an irrefutable aspect of media today. Previous studies have shown a positive relationship between television news viewing and concern about the crime under the framework of cultivation theory (Custers and Van den Bulck, 2013; Romer *et al.*, 2003). Although the indirect link among television and fear about crime has been explored in many studies (Custers and Van den Bulck, 2013;2015), but little attention has been paid that how exposure to social media crime videos is directly and indirectly associated with fear about crime. Moreover, cognitive factors of fear of crime played a mediatory role between the relationship of exposure and concern of crime. In addition to this, fewer studies have kept their focus on university students because several studies took the adult as their participants (Grabe and Drew, 2007; Kort-Butler and Hartshorn, 2011). It is necessary to study this part of the population because they spend more time on different media platforms (Rideout *et al.*, 2010) and media helps them to build their ideas, beliefs, values and thinking patterns (Arnett, 2007).

University students have been taken for this study because they are a unique population to study crime exposure on media exposure and self-protective behavior. Students are the ones who are using traditional and social media to stay update with routine matters. Therefore, students remain concerned with the ongoing situation and law and order. Students are major affectees of mobile theft and other street crimes when they return from the home or when they must withdraw the amount from banks. Moreover, students likely experience fear of crime is different than their parents because they are living away from their families (Arnett, 2004). Students as an individual make the effort to stay protected and show avoidance behavior by locking the doors and closing the windows to secure them from any kind of theft.

Several studies conducted in criminology and other social science disciplines have shown that the cognitive component (perceived risk, perceived control, and perceived seriousness) is the major predictor of fear (Custers *et al.*, 2017; O'Donovan *et al.*, 2007). Therefore, the current study is taking the cognitive component of fear of crime to see that either these components play any role in the context of university students.

Television crime news is taken in this study because a major part of the Pakistani news channel bulletin covers the crime events. These bulletins cover the issue of street crime, theft, sexual violence, and target killing. The other genre of television, crime drama showed the reenactment of different crimes which also sensitize the public about the criminal activities that happened in their surroundings.

There are three main purposes of the study. First is to examine the relationship between media and fear of crime among university students under the theoretical underpinning of the mediated fear model and cultivation theory. Second, the study used all platforms of media which provide exposure to crime-related material which includes television news, crime drama, and social media. Second, the study examined the role of new media crime video exposure on the perceived fear of crime among university students. Third, this study has examined the role of the cognitive component to study the outcome variable (fear about crime). Previous studies conducted on the students helps us to understand the media effects and designing strategies to reduce the fear and victimization among university students (Fisher and Sloan, 2003).

According to cultivation theory, television is a main source of socialization and heavy viewers hold a view about the world which resembles with television world (Gerbner and Gross, 1976). Cultivation theory deals with violence on television and cultivation analysis explores the television contribution in changing people's beliefs and values (Morgan and Shanahan, 2010). Television and social media have a lot of content regarding crime, danger, and victimization which ultimately enhances the fear of crime (Gerbner *et al.*, 2002).

Using cultivation theory as groundwork, the mediated fear model assumes that TV crime exposure is indirectly associated with fear about crime. TV exposure can influence real-life opinion about crime and this opinion can influence the understanding of worry. TV exposure is associated with one or additional cognitive composing of fear about crime (Custers and Van den Bulck, 2013). First related components, individuals perceive that specific crime has an impact on their life. Individuals taking crime seriously are more like to be afraid of that crime (Winkel, 1998). Second related component, individuals who perceive they are going to become prey of crime, they are extra afraid of prey of victimization (Jackson, 2011). Third related components, individuals perceive the ability to control crime is related to fear about crime.

Perceived risk is the only mediator amongst exposure to drama shows and crime news and sexual violence against females (Custers and Van den Bulck, 2013). For example, an individual perceives that burglary has less impact as compare to warn with a weapon. The individual would have less worry about the burglary. For example, females see sexual violence against women, her fear of becoming a victim increases. It's vital to inspect even if the mediated fear model is linked to perceptions of risk, seriousness, and control of crime.

Violence as well as crime content are dominant in media. As compare to light viewers, heavy viewers develop a mindset like media content (Gerbner and Gross, 1976). Due to media content, heavy viewers cultivated overstressed perceptions of danger, fear, and victimization and doing so grow "mean world syndrome" called cultivation theory (Gerbner *et al.*, 2002).

In this study, crime drama and news are vital genres. The amount of violence in both genres is high. There is a common saying about news "if it bleeds, it leads". Violence news becomes a leading news story. Reporter over the report and highlight assault and violence in a story to create sensation (Surette, 2011). Similarly, crime drama shows emphasize personal violent crime (Smith *et al.*, 1998). Media by the repetition of the message strengthens its effects (Gerbner *et al.*, 1980). Media often plays the role of proxy for real-world reality (Weitzer and Kubrin, 2004). Individuals missing direct crime experience take the media as a source of knowledge about a crime (Surette, 2011).

In the present study, the researcher took the different genres of television (News and Crime Drama) and different platforms (Television and Social Media). Television crime news, crime drama, and social media contain high levels of violence because crime creates curiosity and glorify news stories. A major part of television news deals with murder and assault (Surette, 2011). Crime shows emphasize the violent content for rating and they function as surrogates for real-world experience. In most cases, when the direct experience is missing media play its role through mediated crime and murder stories (Surette, 2011; Weitzer and Kubrin, 2004). Several scholars have criticized the Gerbner assumption of content uniformity (Hawkins and Pingree, 1981; Potter, 1993) and they argued that different genres provide different reality and image of the world (Bilandzic and Rössler, 2004; Cohen and Weimann, 2000).

In addition to this, some scholars believe that media effects can also be observed in the presence of direct experience (Van den Bulck, 2004). Viewer experience and reinforcement of media messages produce *resonance* which forces the media user to believe in the mediated reality. If women think that they can become a victim of crime and media reinforced the same thought through their news stories and crime drama, then they become more concerned about the crime in society. On the other hand, if someone personal experience and television stories depict that there are fewer chances of that person to become a victim of crime, that person feels less risk of crime. Therefore, it is important to investigate and study the association between media crime stories, perceived risk, and fear about crime.

The mediated fear model assumes that exposure to media crime stories creates mediated reality about crime and victimization which leads to worry about crime. According to the mediated fear model, media exposure is directly associated with increase fear about crime and different cognitive components which includes perceived seriousness, perceived risk, and perceived ability to handle the crime play a mediatory role (Custers and Van den Bulck, 2013;2015). In the mediated fear model, the first cognitive predictor is "perceived risk of criminal victimization". Those individuals who are afraid of becoming a victim of crime feels more fear while those individuals who are not afraid of becoming victims feel less risk of victimization (Jackson, 2011; Melde, 2009). The second cognitive predictor of fear of crime is "perceived vulnerability". In simple words, we can say it as a perceived ability to control crime. Perceived ability to control is negatively associated with fear of crime because when an individual has a strong sense of controlling the crime, the individual shows less worry about crime (Jackson, 2009;2011; Killias and Clerici, 2000). The third cognitive factor of worry about the crime is "perceived seriousness". Perceived seriousness means to what extent people believe that any incident or a crime story can have an impact on their life. A high level

of perceived seriousness leads to a greater level of fear of crime. There is a positive association between perceived seriousness and fear of crime (Jackson, 2009;2011; Winkel, 1998). According to Jackson (2011), these three cognitive predictors are the part of mediated fear model.

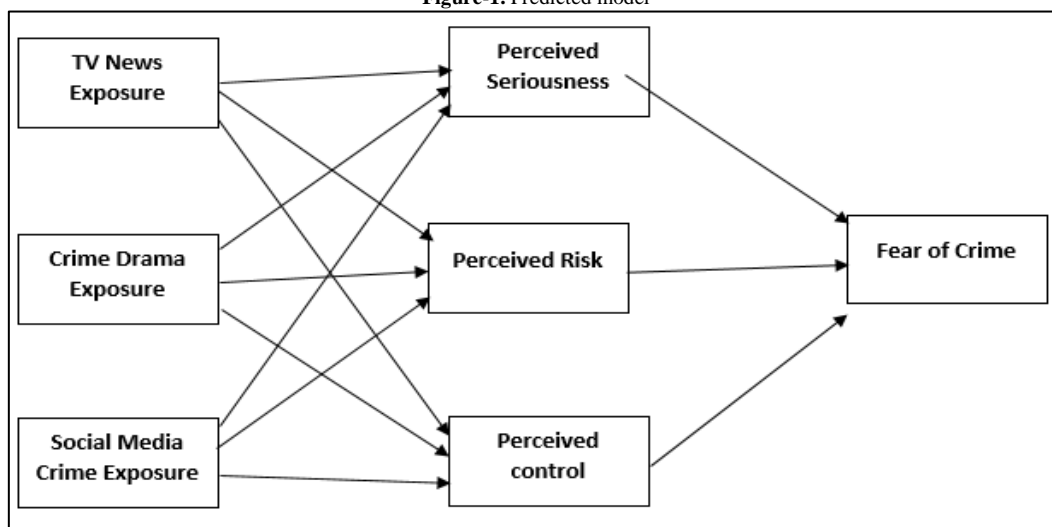
Jackson (2011), argued that cognitive predictors are not only part of the model, but he recommended that mass media is also part of the model. Therefore, television news exposure, crime drama, and social media included in the present study. Moreover, this study also focused on how cognitive predictors (perceived risk, perceived seriousness, and perceived control) are related to exposure to traditional and new media.

The heuristic processing model is the most quoted while explaining the cultivation effect because this model explains the relation of television exposure with judgment (Shrum, 2009). When people make a judgement about something, they just cannot retrieve the old information or perception available to them, but they use some heuristic or rule of thumb to make an assessment. Exposure to television and social media provide heuristic to people about the risk and these heuristics are readily available to heavy user of television and social media. Busselle and Shrum (2003), argued that heavy viewers of television are more likely to estimate some phenomena which were overrepresented on television. As women are depicted more as victims than men on television, there are more chances that women make their judgments through the available heuristics. While on social media, more videos are available in which men are more likely to become a target of theft in ATMs and street crimes. Interestingly, women are depicted as extremely vulnerable in different television genres (Britto *et al.*, 2007; Cavender *et al.*, 1999).

This study aims to examine the association between television crime news exposure and fear of crime. In addition to this, the study examines the association between crime drama exposure and fear about crime. Moreover, the association between social media crime videos and fear about crime will be examined. The mediating role of the cognitive component in the relationship between media exposure and fear about crime was also considered.

Based on previous research on cultivation theory and mediated fear model, the following model and hypotheses are proposed.

Figure-1. Predicted model



**H1:** Television crime news exposure is positively associated with cognitive components of fear (perceived seriousness, perceived risk and perceived control)

**H2:** Crime Drama exposure is positively associated with cognitive components of fear (perceived seriousness, perceived risk, and perceived control).

**H3:** Social media crime video exposure is positively associated with cognitive components of fear (perceived seriousness, perceived risk, and perceived control).

**H4:** Cognitive components of fear are positively associated with the fear of crime.

**H5:** Cognitive components of fear will be mediating the relationship between television news and fear about crime.

**H6:** Cognitive components of fear will be mediating the relationship between crime drama and fear about crime.

**H7:** Cognitive components of fear will be mediating the relationship between social media crime video exposure and fear about crime.

## 2. Material and Method

The participants were selected from mass communication departments of different universities. A total number of 371 students were selected from the University of the Punjab Lahore, Forman Christian College Lahore, University of Lahore, University of Leads, Lahore, University of Management and Technology, University of Central Punjab, and Beacon House National University. The proportion of boys was slightly smaller (48.6%) than the girls (52.4 %) in the sample. Mentioned universities had more strength of girls in the class than the boys in mass communication departments. The mean age of boys in the sample was 22.43 ( $SD = 1.84$ ), and for girls, the mean age was 22.15 ( $SD=1.67$ ).

## 2.1. Data Collection Procedure

Data was collected through a survey questionnaire. First, the questionnaire was prepared and provided to 30 students for pilot testing. After ensuring that respondents can clearly understand the questionnaire, it was distributed to the sample. Second, universities were selected, and permission was taken from mass communication departments for study. When permission was granted to enter the university, the researcher visited the different classes to tell the students about the purpose of the study, and a questionnaire was given to students in the presence of their respective teachers. Prior consent was taken from each student. Confidentiality was ensured after collecting the data. Ethical guidelines of the different universities were followed before surveying those universities.

## 2.2. Measures

Crime drama shows, social media use, and news exposure are included as independent variables in the study.

## 2.3. Mass Media Exposure

Exposure to television crime news and crime drama shows was measured by asking the participants to indicate how many hours do you watch television for news and crime drama shows respectively. Overall, respondents watch the television news for almost 1 hour a day, and an average of 30 minutes they spend on crime drama shows. Moreover, respondents spend most of their time on social media apps which include Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp. To measure the total use time of social media, the time spent on these three apps was summed up and divided by three to get the total social media use time. Respondents spend 2.6 hours on social media ( $M = 2.60$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ).

## 2.4. Mediators

Perceived seriousness of the crime, perceived ability to crime, and perceived risk of crime were taken as mediators. Perceive seriousness measurement is based on [Custers et al. \(2017\)](#) scale which includes four items. The following crime is included in the list: being robbed in the street, being sexually assaulted, being threatened through a knife or pistol, being attacked/hit/kicked by a stranger in the street. The perceived risk of crime measurement is based on the [Custers et al. \(2017\)](#) scale which consists of four items. The following crime is included in the list: being robbed in the street, being sexually assaulted, being threatened through a knife or pistol, being attacked/hit/kicked by a stranger in the street. The questions related to a perceived ability to the crime were taken from [Custers et al. \(2017\)](#) study and the scale consisted of four items. The following crime is included in the list: being robbed in the street, being sexually assaulted, being threatened through a knife or pistol, being attacked/hit/kicked by a stranger in the street.

## 2.5. Fear about Crime

The outcome variable is fear about crime, and it is based on [Surette \(2011\)](#) and [Tillyer et al. \(2011\)](#) scale. The following crime is included in the list: being robbed in the street, being sexually assaulted, being threatened through a knife or pistol, being attacked/hit/kicked by a stranger in the street. Gender, Age, prior victimization, location, and material status were included as demographic variables. Participants were requested to specify their age, ranges from 18 (1) to 30 and above (5), gender ranges from the male (1) to female (2), Location ranges from urban (1) to rural (2), Prior victimization ranges from yes (1) to no (2) and marital status ranges from single (1) to married (2).

## 3. Results

A chain of Independent sample t-test was used to analyze the difference between male and female students before examining the model (see [Table 1.](#) for standard deviations and means). A substantial variance did appear amongst both males and females in their exposure to social media exposure. Males have more social media exposure than females. A significant difference was found between both males and females in their disclosure to News Viewing, with male viewing more news than women. No significant difference was found between both genders in their crime drama viewing, perceived risk, and perceived control. A significant difference was found between both males and females regarding perceived seriousness whereby female participants' perceived seriousness greater than men.

**Table-1.** Standard Deviations, Means and Independent Samples t-Test Results Comparing Male and Female

Dependent Variables	Male		Female		t	df
	M	SD	M	SD		
Social Media Exposure	13.41	4.13	11.54	4.84	4.11***	369
Perceived control	10.47	3.94	11.21	3.84	-1.78	369
Avoidance Behavior	16.62	4.71	19.12	6.41	-4.10***	369
News Viewing	18.84	5	17.04	5.08	3.35**	369
Fear about Crime	9.27	3.17	10.01	3.07	-2.22*	369
Perceived seriousness	10.49	3.94	11.89	4.24	-3.24**	369
Perceived Risk	9.72	3.63	10.1	3.78	-0.97	369
Crime drama exposure	2.92	1.08	2.99	0.94	-0.6	369

Two-tailed significance levels: \*\*\* $p < .001$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \* $p < .05$ .

Results of correlations showed that TV news crime exposure is positively related to crime drama exposure, perceived seriousness towards crime, perceived ability to control crime, perceived risk of crime, and fear about Crime. The results show that H1 has been approved. Crime drama exposure was also positively related to perceived seriousness towards crime, perceived ability to control crime, perceived risk of crime, and fear about Crime. The results show that H2 has been approved. Moreover, social media crime video exposure is significantly positively related to TV crime news exposure, crime drama exposure, perceived seriousness, perceived risk, perceived control, and fear about crime. This means that H3 has been approved. Moreover, perceived seriousness was found significantly positively related to perceived control, perceived risk, and fear about crime. Perceived Control was found significantly positively related to perceived risk and fear of crime. Perceived risk was insignificantly positively related to perceived control while significantly related to fear about crime. This shows that H4 has been approved.

**Table-2.** Correlation among Social Media Exposure, TV Crime News Exposure, perceived (Risk, Control and Seriousness) and Fear about crime

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1.Social Media Crime Exposure	1	.23*	.35*	.42**	.47**	.37**	.45***
2. TV Crime New Exposure		1	.26*	.32**	.30**	.39**	.41**
3. Crime Drama Exposure			1	.49**	.40**	.29**	.38**
4. Perceived Seriousness				1	.24**	.27**	.30**
5. Perceived Risk					1	.36	.31**
6. Perceived Control						1	.49**
7. Fear About Crime							1

Two-tailed significance levels: \*\*\*p < .001 \*\*p < .01. \*p < .05

### 3.1. Testing of Mediation Model

After analyzing the data by Independent Sample T-test and correlation, the researcher tested the simple mediation model through SPSS macro Process model 4 (Hayes, 2017). In this model testing, three variables were dealt with as mediators which include perceived seriousness, perceived risk, and perceived control. Three models were tested in which the first model was tested by taking social media crime exposure as an independent variable and fear of crime as the dependent variable. In the second model, TV crime news was taken as an independent variable and fear about crime as the dependent variable. In model three, crime drama exposure was taken as an independent variable and fear about crime was dependent variable. In all three models, perceived seriousness, perceived risk, and perceived control remained as mediating variables.

**Figure-2.** Results from the Process Model

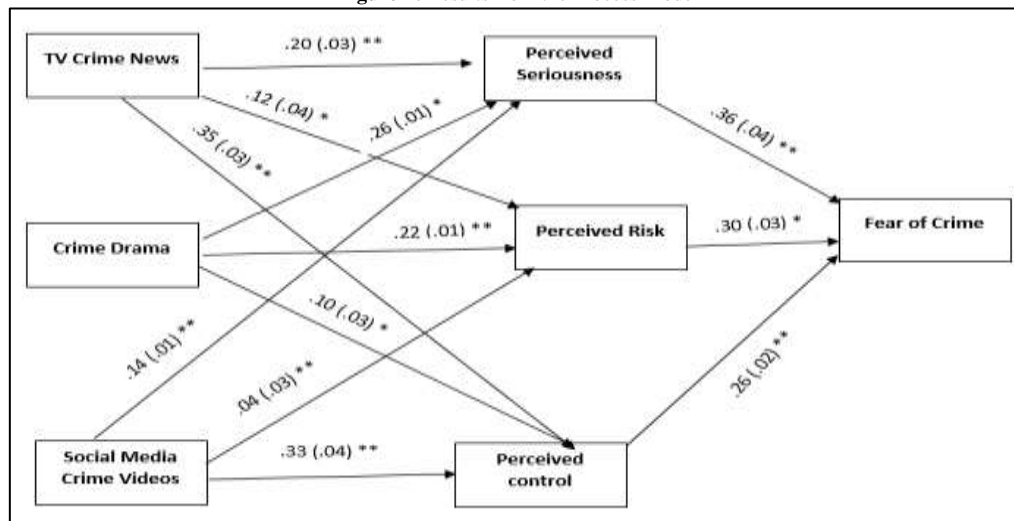


Figure 2 above shows the results from the process model. These results were obtained after controlling the gender, age, income, and direct experience of crime. The standardized beta values show that higher exposure to television crime news ( $b=.20, p<.01$ ), social media crime videos ( $b=.14, p<.01$ ), and crime drama ( $b=.26, p<.01$ ) have a higher level of perceived seriousness. Moreover, the results show that higher exposure to television crime news ( $b=.12, p<.01$ ), social media crime videos ( $b=.04, p<.01$ ), and crime drama ( $b=.22, p<.01$ ) have a higher level of perceived risk. In addition to this, direct effects show that higher exposure to television crime news ( $b=.35, p<.01$ ), social media crime videos ( $b=.33, p<.01$ ), and crime drama ( $b=.10, p<.01$ ) have a higher level of perceived control. The direct effect of television crime news, social media crime videos, and crime drama on fear about crime were also significant.

The specific indirect effect of television crime news on fear about crime was mediated by perceived seriousness ( $b=.05, SE=.02, 95\% \text{ CI } [.02, .07]$ ) perceived risk ( $b=.03, SE=.001, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.05, -.01]$ ) and perceived control ( $b=.03, SE=.001, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.05, -.01]$ ). The results are showing that watching television crime news led to a higher level of perceived seriousness, risk, and control. These results are in support of the H5.

The specific indirect effect of crime drama on fear about crime was mediated by perceived seriousness ( $b=-.03$ ,  $SE=.02$ , 95% CI [-.09, -.02] perceived risk ( $b=.01$ ,  $SE=.008$ , 95% CI [.002, .035] and perceived control ( $b=-.07$ ,  $SE=.003$ , 95% CI [-.01, -.05]. The results further indicate that more exposure to crime drama led to a lower level of seriousness and perceived control while higher levels of perceived risk. These results are in the support of hypothesis 6.

The specific indirect effect of social media crime videos on fear about crime was also mediated by perceived seriousness ( $b=.02$ ,  $SE=.03$ , 95% CI [-.02, -.09] perceived risk ( $b=.05$ ,  $SE=.024$ , 95% CI [.07, .10] and perceived control ( $b=.05$ ,  $SE=.004$ , 95% CI [-.06, -.02]. The results indicate that a higher level of social media crime video exposure led to a higher level of risk, seriousness, and control. These results are in the support of hypothesis 7.

## 4. Discussion

This study is important in two ways. First, the study included the university students because fewer researches are available in which university students has been taken as a participant to find out the relationship between media crime watching and fear about crime. It's hard to overlook university students because they consume the media more often and they are most vulnerable than other populations. Second, this study included the traditional and social media in the study which has not been explored before. Social media is becoming popular in the young generation and they spent most of their time on social media websites/apps.

The findings of this study show that traditional media crime exposure (news and crime drama) and social media crime videos are positively related to fear of crime. These findings are in line with previous findings Custers and Van den Bulck (2015) and Shrum (2009). The viewers of crime dramas attach and identify themselves with drama characters (Green and Brock, 2000). When a character becomes a victim the viewer also thinks that he/she can also become a victim of crime. Through this way, media exposure cultivates the risk and perceived seriousness among the viewer.

The result of this study is in favor of the mediated fear model which states that media crime exposure and fear about the crime are mediated by perceived seriousness, risk, and control. Our study results show that these three variables are significant mediators. Other studies have also shown the same results (Jackson, 2011; Rader *et al.*, 2007).

### 4.1. Limitations

There are two limitations to this study. Firstly, data collection was done only from two cities of Punjab. More cities can be added to get diverse data. Secondly, this study is based on survey data and did not use the experiment to check the cause and effect.

### 4.2. Future Directions

Various future directions can be considered. First, the mediated fear model can be tested on the base of gender. Moreover, future studies can investigate what precautionary behavior students adopt after fearing crime. Different questions can be added to the questionnaire to investigate. Secondly, Location, marital status, age, and prior victimization can also contribute to study Self-protective Behavior. Different questions can be added to the questionnaire to investigate.

## 5. Conclusion

Repeated violent messages can influence your perception of criminal victimization. Our results found that all three mediators (Perceived Control, Perceived Risk, Perceived Seriousness) were one way or other found significant mediator between television crime exposure, and fear about crime. It can be possible that perception about criminal victimization (Perceived Control, Risk, and Seriousness) of students may differ from different life stages (Arnett, 2000). Finally, the findings of this study can be used to help reduce the fear of crime in students by providing professional counseling and making the atmosphere around students safer.

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