

The Question Answered: Is there a relationship between violent media (e.g. video games, films) and violent, aggressive behaviour?

Introduction

This essay aims to answer whether violent media exposure is associated with violent, aggressive behaviour. Through examining relevant theories incorporated in the lecture, past research studies, and a synthesis combining the two and specific scenarios, it becomes apparent that a causality between violent media and aggression and violent behaviours needs further validation. More specifically, while research has shown that violent media exposure can potentially increase aggression in certain populations, a wide range of mediating factors ultimately decide whether the aggression or violent behaviour are manifested concretely in the real world and sustained. Therefore, this essay concludes that there is a relationship between the two, but the relationship is rather a context-specific association and certainly not a straightforward causation.

Background Context

It is imperative to approach the term violent, aggressive behaviour in a more nuanced and comprehensive fashion, as not doing so renders the question susceptible to broad interpretations and thereby causing the lack of precise answers due to the shortage of research in certain areas (e.g., association between military intervention and violent media exposure among military personnel). Aggression is categorised into hostile aggression and instrumental aggression. Hostile aggression refers to the act aiming to harm the well-being of others; Instrumental aggression, on the other hand, is defined as the intention to harm to achieve an end goal, in which harm serves as a means (Bushman & Anderson, 2001). The impulsive

nature of hostile aggression may be better suited in terms of answering the question because instrumental aggression entails premeditation and strategies, in which case the manifestation can take place in a grander scale of context such as military actions and politics, in which case the violent media would be irrelevant because the premeditation functions rather independently of emotions, genetics, and so on, which are central to hostile aggression and can be caused by violent media (Bushman & Anderson, 2001).

Behind hostile aggression are predisposing, precipitating, and sustaining factors, including genetics, environmental/situational stimuli, physiological and emotional arousal, and other social factors, all of which are underlined by different theories and hypotheses. One of them is Bandura's social learning theory, which holds that children learn behavioural patterns through processes including observing and imitating others, and such is the case for aggression (Galanaki & Malafantis, 2022). From this perspective, it may be easy to see how violent media can induce aggression in cases where game players and film watchers observe and imitate violence or aggression seen in the game and film. Additionally, the original hypothesis of aggression is premised on the notion that the inability to achieve a goal due to situations elicits frustration, which then causes aggression (Dollard et al., 1939).

This original hypothesis was subsequently revamped, with the new version emphasising self-restraint, other responses caused by frustration, and the occurrence of aggression without frustration. In lieu of the frustration as the then perceived main cause for aggression, theories hold that other negative emotions following environmental stimuli (e.g., attack, insult, threat, etc.) also cause aggression (Huesmann, 2018). Positive affect also causes aggression, wherein people commit aggression because they find it pleasurable (Chester, 2017). What's more,

deindividuation, which is the psychological state of decreased self-identity and self-awareness, has also been associated with aggression (Vilanova et al., 2017). Therefore, it is safe to suggest that violent media interacts with aggressive, violent behaviours in a multifaceted way, in which negative emotions caused by losing the video game (Dowsett & Jackson, 2019), the learned positive affect from certain violent media (e.g., games or films satisfying personal needs for power), fatigue after prolonged violent media use (which is a form of deindividuation), and so on, can all be the indirect influence from violent media that precipitates aggressive behaviour.

The aforementioned theories tie into the question answered by this essay through marking that aggression stems from a wide range of factors as opposed to violent media exposure alone. It is worth noting, also, that research studies examining the relationship between violent media and aggression often overlook the accompanying conditions and contexts, such as deindividuation and whether it is a participant who learned aggression early on and acted aggressively after entering the study, thereby undermining the validity of the conclusion in terms of to what extent violent media exposure accounts for the observed elevated aggression. Some of these potential discrepancies and mediating factors are discussed below using evidence.

Literature review

Research confirming the association between violent media exposure and aggression abounds. This is most evident in the large-scale meta-analyses and longitudinal studies focusing on violent video games across the globe and populations of all ages (Anderson et al., 2010; Anderson & Dill, 2000; Greitemeyer, 2019; Prescott et al., 2017). Other forms of

violent media, including films, have also been associated with aggressive thoughts and actions among various age groups (Bender et al., 2018; Ghandali et al., 2022). However, a closer examination of some of the studies reveals potential discrepancies. The field as a whole also appears to suffer from great levels of conflict of interest, as the profitable market for violent media producers, who have ties with the government, and the humanitarian-leaning researchers are in constant variance with each other (The Lancet Regional Health-Americas, 2023). While the politicisation is difficult to account for, the following sections focus on critiquing past research evidence regarding the relationship between violent media and aggression.

Research involving children and adolescents

One of the recent studies on the topic was done by Ybarra et al. (2022), in which 1586 youth aged 10 to 15 participated. The study, spanning from 2006 to 2011, measured the baseline level of violent media exposure, including video games, TV programs, music, and websites, among the participants through an online survey, followed by the 5-year follow-up survey on the level of violent media exposure as well as the violent behaviour among the participants. The results indicate an overwhelmingly strong association between the violent media exposure and violent behaviour at the 5-year follow-up, with the possibility of seriously violent behaviours increasing 2.45-fold with each incremental increase in baseline violent media exposure. However, several issues remain. First, despite the initial number of subjects being 1586, only 887 of them responded at the 5-year follow-up, which is a significant attrition rate that compromises the validity. Besides, although the study explicitly mentioned that the association persisted even when “influential characteristics” were adjusted

for (Ybarra et al., 2022, p. 1), it failed to specify what these characteristics were and if there were other confounding factors at all. Additionally, those exposed to violent cartoons and websites at a level higher than the baseline one did not report to engage in more violent behaviours, which the study attributed to “statistical anomaly” (Ybarra et al., 2023, p. 6), discounting the possibility of the counterargument. As acknowledged by the researchers, self-report was not perfectly reliable. Therefore, the conclusion insofar lacks validity and reliability.

Consistent with the above finding, Shao and Wang’s (2019) study suggests a statistically significant correlation between violent video game exposure and adolescent aggression. However, when family environment, the within-study factor that consists of family violence, parenting style, and other factors, is controlled for, the correlation weakened significantly, in which adolescents who possess more protective factors reported less aggression compared to those with more risk factors within the family system. Also siding with the above findings is Ghandali et al.’s (2022) and Coyne et al.’s (2017) study focusing on the effects of violent movies on risky behaviours and aggression in children and adolescents. Aside from the limitations to the methodology, including the use of self-reporting scales measuring aggressiveness, these studies all focused on children and adolescents exclusively and failed to provide comprehensive control and discussion of other confounding factors, including the context in which the reported aggression took place (i.e., whether the aggression was caused by situational factors rather than exposure to violent media materials), thereby undermining the generalizability to broader populations and the reliability.

Research on Adult Populations

When shifting our focus to similar research done on adult subjects and violent crimes, the landscape seems to shift as well. Kühn et al.'s (2018) study involving 90 participants who were randomly assigned to groups with and without violent game interventions is one of the examples, which found no correlation between aggression and playing violent video games. However, evidence against this finding remains at large (Bushman & Huesmann, 2006; Huesmann, 2009). Interestingly, due to different cognitive abilities between adults and children, violent media tends to have comparatively more sustained impacts on children while affecting adults in the short term to a larger extent (Bushman & Huesmann, 2006).

The more concerning consequences of violent media-induced aggression are perhaps violent crimes, the ultimate manifestation of aggression. For the gravity it carries, it ought to dictate what the answer to the essay question is greatly. Studies have found no causal relationship between violent media effects and violent crimes among adult offenders, including mass shootings (Phillips, 2017; Savage, 2003). In fact, there is even evidence suggesting that violent media exposure reduces crime because of the incapacitation effect and presumably the catharsis effect that viewers and game players experience (Lindo et al., 2019).

Discussion

Overall, the consensus that violent media exposure is associated with aggression exists in the field. Notwithstanding, the significance of the correlation varies greatly; the aggression in relation to different types of violent media materials remains understudied; the studied populations are mostly children and adolescents; and most importantly, the confounding factors, including the context in which the participants' aggressive behaviours took place and environmental factors, are rarely accounted for in a comprehensive manner. In addition,

based on the examined literature, violent media does not seem to cause violent crimes among adult populations.

As mentioned before, the field of this topic is highly politicised given the extremely high stakes involving future generations and societal safety in addition to the conflict of interest between the media industry and humanitarian-leaning advocates and researchers, so to speak. Scholars have pointed out this conflict directly by calling media effects researchers “causationists,” whose works are funded by agencies that see the media industry as a threat to family values (Phillips, 2017). And given the almost unstoppable trend of violent media materials, the helpless situation we are all in, the discussion ultimately transcends to an ideological debate of whether evil stems from seeing evil itself.

Conclusion

In conclusion, current research does not provide sufficient evidence to either confirm or nullify the causal relationship between violent media and violent, aggressive behaviour. So many influencing factors can contribute to the scenarios, as indicated by theories of aggression, which are extremely difficult for studies to comprehensively control for. Instead of arriving at a straightforward answer to the question, this essay concludes that whether violent media exposure leads to violent, aggressive behaviours depends on the context, in which factors such as age, types of violent media materials, and types of aggression all function as mediators to the relationship.

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