



Violent video games and anger as predictors of aggression [☆]

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Abstract

Considerable research has demonstrated that playing violent video games can increase aggression. The theoretical framework upon which a good deal of this research has rested is known as the General Aggression Model (GAM; [Anderson, C. A., & Bushman, B. J. (2002). Human aggression. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 53, 27–51]). The current study tested an assumption of the GAM by examining if the dispositional trait of anger moderated the relation between violent video games and aggression. A total of 167 undergraduate students (79 females, 88 males) first completed a measure of anger and were then randomly assigned to play either a non-violent or violent video game. After the video game play period, participants completed ambiguous story stems in order to assess aggression. Consistent with predictions of the GAM, anger significantly moderated the effect of video game violence on aggression. Specifically, participants who were angry were more affected by violent video games than participants who were not angry.

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1. Introduction

Following the 1999 Columbine High School shootings, lawmakers, researchers, activists, and laypersons became increasingly concerned with the potentially dangerous effects

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of violent video games. Jack Thompson (2000), a lawyer who has argued for the acquittal of defendants in violent video game cases, notes, “In every school shooting, we find that kids who pull the trigger are video gamers.” Of course, given the popularity of video games, it is clear that most children who play these games are not so affected by this violent medium that they actually commit murder. In fact, although many of the children who have engaged in violent school rampages are video game players (Anderson, 2004), these children are also commonly described by themselves and others as being extremely angry (Gibbs & Roche, 1999; Sandler & Alpert, 2000). Such anecdotal observations suggest that individuals who are generally angry may be more adversely affected by violent video games than individuals who are not. To this end, the current research examines if the trait of anger moderates the effect that violent video games have on aggression.

Video games have become one of the major entertainment media for children growing up today (Gentile & Anderson, 2003). The popularity of video games combined with the fact that over 50% of the games available on the market contain some form of violence (Gentile & Anderson, 2003), has caused some concern among parents, researchers, and policy makers. Over a decade of correlational and experimental research has suggested that violent video games are linked to various negative behaviors and cognitions, such as hostility, physical altercations, poor school performance, decreases in pro-social behavior, and aggression (e.g., Anderson et al., 2004; Bushman & Anderson, 2002; Gentile, Linder, & Walsh, 2003; Gentile, Lynch, Linder, & Walsh, 2004; Sheese & Graziano, 2005).

Much of the experimental research that has been conducted on violent video games and aggression suggests that there is some type of causal relationship between the two; namely that violent video games increase aggression. A number of theories about how and why violent video games affect aggression have been posited, but one in particular has garnered much attention—the General Aggression Model (GAM; Bushman & Anderson, 2002; Gentile et al., 2004; Uhlmann & Swanson, 2004). The GAM suggests that the link between exposure to a situational variable (e.g., violent media) and the output variable of aggression is mediated by one’s cognition, affect, and arousal (Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Anderson & Ford, 1986; Bushman & Anderson, 2002). The GAM is unique as a model of aggression because it does not assume that people are “blank slates” before they are exposed to violent media. Instead, it suggests that not all people will interpret and be affected by violent media in a similar manner.

According to the GAM, aggressive behavior is best predicted by considering the person within a situation. In other words, stable dispositions might alter how one interprets or responds to violent or hostile stimuli. For example, in a recent extension of the GAM, Anderson and Bushman (2002) specifically note several reasons why the dispositional characteristic of anger might play a causal role in aggression. First, anger reduces one’s inhibition against aggressive acts. Second, anger primes aggressive thoughts, making one more likely to interpret ambiguous situations as hostile. Third, anger “energizes behavior” by increasing one’s arousal levels, which in turn can lead to aggression if there is significant provocation shortly after the activity. Finally, anger makes one more likely to attend to hostile or violent information.

These assumptions of the GAM imply that anger will have both a main effect on aggressive behavior and will also moderate the effect of violent stimuli. Studies examining the effects of violent media have found consistent evidence demonstrating the notion that

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