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Trait aggressiveness, media violence, and perceptions of interpersonal conflict

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Abstract

This study explores the short-term impact of exposure to violent mass media content while accounting for personality (i.e. trait-aggression) and situational factors (e.g. responsibility for actions). Following exposure to either a violent or nonviolent movie, participants reported their perceptions of violent interpersonal incidents described in four written scenarios. The findings revealed that respondents' aggressive dispositions and sex mediated the impact of media violence on subsequent perceptions of violent, interpersonal conflicts. Specifically, high trait-aggressive individuals generally displayed more callous and hostile tendencies in their perceptions of interpersonal conflicts than low trait-aggressive individuals. Moreover, high trait-aggressive males were found to be most extreme in reporting aggressive thoughts and actions. Surprisingly, the data did not support the hypothesis that exposure to a violent movie would have a negative impact on viewers. Berkowitz's cognitive-neoassociationistic theory [Berkowitz, L. (1984). Some effects of thoughts on anti-social and prosocial influences on media effects: a cognitive-neoassociation analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 95, 410–427; Berkowitz, L. (1990). On the formation and regulation of anger and aggression: a cognitive-neoassociation analysis. *American Psychologist*, 45, 494–503; Jo, E. & Berkowitz, L. (1994). A priming effect analysis of media influences: an update. In J. Bryant & D. Zillman, *Media effects: advances in theory and research* (pp. 43–60). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum] is employed to account for this discrepancy. Suggestions for future research are provided. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Trait aggressiveness; Media violence; Perceptions; Interpersonal conflict

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1. Introduction

The phenomenon of media violence is one of the most extensively studied issues in the social sciences, spanning more than 1000 publications in recent years (cf. Geen, 1994; Hogben, 1998; Zillmann & Weaver, 1999). Despite this large body of research, certain aspects of the phenomenon are still in need of further inquiry. One such area concerns the neglect of individual difference variables in media violence research (cf. Zillmann & Weaver, 1997). The purpose of this study is to extend the literature by examining the impact of individuals' trait-aggressiveness on the effects of exposure to media violence.

A review of the literature reveals that most contemporary social scientists agree that, under certain conditions, exposure to media violence is causally related to subsequent aggression in humans (cf. Cantor, 2000; Geen, 1994; Roberts & Maccoby, 1985; Zillmann & Weaver, 1997, 1999). The strongest support for the conclusion that media violence is a significant contributor to aggressive behavior is provided by recent meta-analyses (e.g. Hogben, 1998; Paik & Comstock, 1994). From an analysis combining more than 200 correlational and experimental studies, for instance, Paik and Comstock concluded that "the findings obtained in the last decade and a half strengthen the evidence that television violence increases aggressive and antisocial behavior, this to a varying degree, depending on the choice of the variables considered" (p. 538). At the same time, however, media violence research has been repeatedly criticized because of its focus on short-term effects, its lack of external validity, and its failure to account for individual differences (cf. Freedman, 1988).

Interestingly, most aggression theories (e.g. Bandura, 1973; Berkowitz, 1974; Zillmann, 1979) do not consider the potential impact of individual differences. An exception to this scheme is Bushman's (1995, 1996) work, which represents an extension of Berkowitz's (1984, 1990; Jo & Berkowitz, 1994) cognitive-neoassociationistic aggression model. In his theory, Berkowitz argues that, for a short time after exposure, mass-mediated messages activate ideas with similar meanings in receivers and that these ideas can stimulate other semantically associated ideas and action propensities.

Bushman (1995, 1996; also see Zillmann & Weaver, 1997, 1999) has extended Berkowitz's theory by advancing the notion that personality variables moderate the effects of violent stimuli on the activation of concepts related to aggression. He proposes that: (1) individuals with highly aggressive predispositions should possess more extensive cognitive-associative networks related to aggression than those with less aggressive predispositions and, consequently, (2) that violent stimuli should be most likely to prime aggressive concepts in aggressively predisposed individuals. Moreover, (3) because a person's inclination toward aggression is conceptualized as a trait it is deemed accessible to quantitative analysis by means of self-report inventories such as the Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire (BPAQ; Buss & Perry, 1992). Inventory scores serve as an indirect measure of trait-aggressiveness, that is, "the extent and development of an individual's aggressive cognitive-associative network. People with high scores on trait-aggressiveness inventories should have more extensive aggressive associative networks than those with low scores" (Bushman, 1996, p. 812). Indeed, Bushman (1995, 1996), in a series of interrelated experiments, found substantial support for the notion that high trait-aggressive individuals possess more developed aggressive cognitive-associative networks, and are therefore more likely to evidence aggressive affect or behavior due to exposure to aggressive or ambiguous stimuli. Most importantly, he suggested

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