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Everyday sadism predicts violent video game preferences

Tobias Greitemeyer *

Institute of Psychology, University of Innsbruck, Innrain 52, 6020 Innsbruck, Austria

A B S T R A C T

Playing violent video games has become an integral part of the lives of many people, although some people more than others may be predisposed to enjoy violent video games. Two cross-sectional studies examined the extent to which everyday sadism predicts the amount of violent video game play. Past research has shown that everyday sadists obtain pleasure from cruel behaviors. Hence, I reasoned that everyday sadists are drawn to violent video games because killing game characters might be an opportunity to satisfy their need for cruelty. In fact, results revealed a positive link between everyday sadism and the amount of violent video game exposure. Moreover, this relation statistically held when controlling for the impact of trait aggression, the Big 5, narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy.

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1. Introduction

Playing video games is becoming more and more popular. One national survey showed that 88% of American youth between ages 8 and 18 play video games (Gentile, 2009). Another survey even indicated that about 97% of teens play video games regularly (Lenhart, Kahne, Middaugh, Macgill, Evans, & Vitak, 2008). Content analyses have shown that most video games contain violence (Dill, Gentile, Richter, & Dill, 2005) and that violent video games are highly popular (Buchman & Funk, 1996). The present research examines whether some individuals are particularly predisposed to enjoy violent video games. Concretely, I reasoned that individuals who score high on the personality trait of sadism would be more likely than others to play violent video games.

Sadism can be characterized as deriving pleasure from being responsible for others' experiences of pain. Everyday sadism is the nonclinical form of sadism (Buckels, Jones, & Paulhus, 2013a), "differing from clinical sadism in that the individual does not harm others out of the need for cruelty but rather for the pleasure derived from the act" (p. 64, Porter, Bhanwer, Woodworth, & Black, 2014). Recent research has confirmed that everyday sadists indeed find more pleasure in harming other people than do nonsadists. For example, Buckels et al. (2013a) showed that sadists obtain pleasure from cruel behaviors and that they are even willing to work for the opportunity to hurt an innocent victim. Overall, it appears that everyday sadists more than others seek opportunities to indulge their appetites for cruelty (see also Buckels, Trapnell, & Paulhus, 2014).

The main goal of playing a violent video game is to seriously harm other game characters. In fact, some modern video games involve highly realistic depictions of human injury and death. Moreover, many violent video games are played from a first-person perspective. In these first-person shooter games, the player experiences the weapon-based combat through the eyes of the player character. Hence, killing as many game characters as possible during violent video game play may be a welcome opportunity for everyday sadists to satisfy their need for cruelty. This reasoning is also in line with a uses and gratifications perspective (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). According to this view, personality dimensions create certain needs in individuals and these needs in turn influence what kind of media individuals seek out for exposure. For instance, in one study (Slater, Henry, Swaim, & Anderson, 2003), trait aggressiveness was a significant predictor for the preference for violent media (although only concurrently but not over time).

Abundant research has shown that playing violent video games increases aggressive behavior. Although some studies failed to find a link between violent video game play and aggression (for a review, Elson & Ferguson, 2014), two recent meta-analyses (Anderson et al., 2010; Greitemeyer & Mügge, 2014) showed that playing violent video games significantly increases the accessibility of aggressive thoughts, hostile affect, and aggressive behavior and that these effects are consistently found in experimental, cross-sectional, and longitudinal studies. The present research aims to document a link between the amount of violent video game exposure and everyday sadism. Because everyday sadism is related to trait aggression, I also examined whether the proposed link between violent video game exposure and everyday sadism would hold when controlling for the impact of trait aggression.

* Tel.: +43 (0)512 507 37452.
  E-mail address: tobias.greitemeyer@uibk.ac.at

Previous research has shown that some of the Big 5 personality dimensions are related to violent video game preferences. Anderson et al. (2004) found that violent video game exposure was negatively associated with agreeableness and conscientiousness. Chory and Goodboy (2011) also found that individuals low (vs. high) in agreeableness are more likely to play violent video games, but they did not replicate the association between violent video game exposure and conscientiousness. Instead, they further found a positive relation between violent video game exposure and openness. In any case, it appears that everyday sadism is related to some fundamental personality dispositions and thus the Big 5 might account for the proposed link between everyday sadism and amount of violent video game play. Hence, in the present studies, the Big 5 were assessed and their influence on the relation between everyday sadism and the amount of violent video game exposure was also examined.

The hypothesis that everyday sadism predicts amount of violent video game play was examined in two cross-sectional studies. It should be noted that due to the correlational nature of the study design, no causal interpretations can be made. The present research was interested in the extent to which everyday sadism predicts violent video game exposure. But violent video game exposure may also cause everyday sadism. In fact, the two directions are by no means mutually exclusive. I will return to this issue in the General Discussion.

2. Study 1

Study 1 examines the idea that everyday sadism is associated with violent video game exposure. In a cross-sectional study, participants indicated their amount of playing violent video games and provided self-ratings of everyday sadism. Moreover, participants responded to a measure of trait aggression and the Big 5. I predicted that everyday sadism would be positively associated with amount of violent video game exposure. I further examined whether this effect would remain significant when controlling for the influence of trait aggression and the Big 5.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants, procedure, and materials

Participants were invited via a university mailing list. Four hundred and forty-five individuals accepted the invitation. Two hundred and twenty individuals did not complete the questionnaire so the final sample comprised 225 students/employees of an Austrian university (162 females, 63 males; mean age = 25.1 years, SD = 8.0).

After providing demographic data, participants were asked to name their three favorite video games, to indicate how often they play each video game (on a scale from 1 = sometimes to 7 = very often), and to rate how violent the content of each video game was (on a scale from 1 = not at all to 7 = very). For each video game, the amount of time playing was multiplied by violent content. These three violent video game exposure scores were summed to provide an overall index of violent video game exposure. This approach to measure violent video game exposure has been successfully employed in previous video game research (e.g., Anderson & Dill, 2000; Greitemeyer, 2014).

The expanded version of the Comprehensive Assessment of Sadistic Tendencies (Buckels, Jones, & Paulhus, 2013b) was used to assess physical and verbal sadism, respectively.[1] The physical sadism scale contains five items ($\alpha = .67$). Sample items are: "I enjoy

physically hurting people" and "I enjoy tormenting people". The verbal sadism scale contains six items ($\alpha = .70$). Sample items are: "I enjoy making jokes at the expense of others" and "When making fun of someone, it is especially amusing if they realize what I'm doing". To measure trait aggression, participants responded to the short version of the Buss and Perry aggression questionnaire (Bryant & Smith, 2001), which contains 12 items ($\alpha = .79$). Sample items are: "Given enough provocation, I may hit another person." and "I have trouble controlling my temper." To measure the Big 5, a 10-item measure (Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003) was employed. There are two items per scale. Some scale reliabilities were relatively poor (conscientiousness: $\alpha = .71$, neuroticism: $\alpha = .58$, openness: $\alpha = .44$, agreeableness: $\alpha = .46$, extraversion: $\alpha = .72$). This issue will be later discussed. All items were assessed on a scale from 1 to 7. For all scales, items were pooled, using the average.

2.2. Results

Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations of all measures are shown in Table 1. As expected, amount of violent video game play was positively associated with both physical and verbal sadism. Amount of violent video game play was also positively associated with trait aggression and negatively with conscientiousness and agreeableness. To examine whether physical and verbal sadism, respectively, are associated with amount of violent video game play when controlling for the impact of trait aggression and the Big 5, a multiple regression was performed on the data. Physical, verbal sadism, trait aggression, and the Big 5 were used as predictors for amount of violent video game play. The overall regression was significant, $F(8,216) = 3.57$, $p = .001$. Most importantly, both physical, $\beta = .16$, $p = .028$, and verbal sadism, $\beta = .17$, $p = .028$, were still significantly associated with amount of violent video game play. Conscientiousness also significantly predicted amount of violent video game play, $\beta = -.15$, $p = .036$, whereas all other predictors did not, all βs < .10, all ps > .271.

2.3. Discussion

Study 1 provided support for the idea that everyday sadism is associated with exposure to violent video games. As in previous research (Anderson et al., 2010; Greitemeyer & Mügge, 2014), there was a significant correlation between the amount of violent video game play and trait aggression. There was also a strong link between the measures of everyday sadism and trait aggression. It is noteworthy, however, that the relation between everyday sadism and violent video game exposure held when controlling for trait aggression. That is, that frequent players of violent video game score higher on everyday sadism is *not* due to them being more aggressive. Likewise, amount of violent video game play and sadism were negatively associated with agreeableness, but the relation between violent video game exposure and everyday sadism remained significant when controlling for agreeableness. Finally, violent video game exposure and conscientiousness were also significantly related, but there was no reliable link between everyday sadism and conscientiousness. Overall, it appears that there is a robust association between everyday sadism and the amount of violent video game exposure.

Everyday sadism has been shown to be a part of the Dark Tetrad of personality, the other dimensions being narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy (Buckels et al., 2013a; Chabrol, Van Leeuwen, Rodgers, & Séjourné, 2009; for a review of the Dark Triad, see Furnham, Richards, & Paulhus, 2013). Narcissists tend to have a grandiose sense of self-importance and a sense of superiority. Machiavellianism can be characterized as having a tendency to manipulate and exploit others. Psychopathy involves callousness

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[1] The CAST also assesses a third form of sadistic tendencies (vicarious sadism), but this scale was not included in the present studies.