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# Viewing of mass media violence, perception of violence, personality and academic achievement

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## Abstract

The aim of this work was to study the relationship between the viewing of and interest in violent episodes on TV, whether they be in action and adventure films or cartoons, and both personality, measured by the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQ/J), the Sensation Seeking Scale (SSS/J) and the Sensitivity to Punishment and Sensitivity to Reward Scales (SP-SR), and academic achievement. The sample was made up of 235 teenage boys and 235 teenage girls. The study also took account of teachers' reports on student personality traits and attitudes such as aggressivity, excitability, leadership, responsibility and interest in studies. Our results reveal that those boys who perceive violent cartoon films as being funny and thrilling are deemed more aggressive and excitable by their teachers. Those boys who rate action and adventure films as more interesting attain lower academic achievement. Boys and girls who perceive violent cartoon films as being thrilling and funny get higher scores on N, P, SSS/J and SR. Those boys who rate action and adventure films watched as more interesting get higher scores on N, P, SSS/J and SR, whereas girls do likewise on E and P, SSS/J. The possible relationship between disinhibited, not very socialised personality and interest in violent topics on TV is thereafter discussed. © 1998 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

*Key words:* TV violence; Personality; Psychoticism; Sensation-seeking; Sensitivity to reward; Sensitivity to reward; Aggressive behaviour; Academic achievement

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## 1. Introduction

In Western countries, the television industry is becoming ever more competitive, with viewing figures being regularly published in the press and programme planning being focused on getting

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the maximum number of viewers possible. Violence-related topics serve to boost viewing figures, with regard to both adults and children. As a result, the amount of programme time devoted to such programmes is incredibly large. The relationship between the exposure of children and adults to violent images in the media, and aggressive and anti-social behaviour in adulthood has been widely-researched, in both longitudinal studies and the meta-analysis of specialised literature (Freedman, 1984; Comstock and Strasburger, 1990, 1993; Wood et al., 1991; Wiegman and Kuttschreuter, 1992; Viemerö and Paaajanen, 1992; Haejung and Comstock, 1994). These studies point to the existence of a positive lineal relationship between the viewing of violent programmes and films and aggressivity, both in the laboratory and real life. There are many possible explanations for the link between exposure to media violence and aggressive behaviour: (a) the former could be the cause of the latter; (b) it might also be that aggressive people like to watch TV more often; (c) aggressive behaviour and a liking for violent programmes might both be attributable to other variables.

The observation of social models is a variable of relevance to the learning and maintenance of aggressive behaviour (Bandura, 1973). Huesmann and Eron (1986) reported that the relationship between watching violent TV programmes at the age of 11 and violent behaviour at 19 was very significant, whereas aggressive behaviour was not predictive of a preference for violent television at the age of 19. Such an influence could, however, be affected by several individual differences, which might come into play in both the watching and/or showing an interest in violent films, and the manifestation of aggressive behaviour.

As for the influence of sex, Huesmann et al. (1984) observed greater viewing of violence on TV amongst boys than girls, and a positive relationship between peer-nominated aggression and TV violence viewing in both sexes. Moreover, men remember violent news items more clearly than women, especially on audiovisual media (Gunter and Furnham, 1986). With regard to personality, Singer and Singer (1981, 1986) observed that high aggression children (even those of low level TV viewing) displayed an average of action and adventure programme viewing four times higher than that of less aggressive children. Freedman (1984) reported, furthermore, that aggressive people enjoy violent TV programmes more, though this relationship is not very pronounced. Gunter and Furnham (1983) found that, in adult samples, subjects scoring high on Neuroticism (N; Eysenck and Eysenck, 1975) perceived violent television scenes as being more serious and real; subjects with high scores on N and P showed a tendency to being more disturbed personally by most types of violence. Also, Gunter (1983) observed individual differences in the evaluation of harmful violence on TV: older people and lower P scorers tended to perceive harmful violence as more violent.

Zuckerman and Litle (1986) observed in undergraduate students that people who show a greater curiosity about, and/or preference for violent and horror films, get higher scores on the Psychoticism Scale (P; Eysenck Personality Questionnaire; Eysenck and Eysenck, 1975), and on the Sensation-seeking Scale (SSS; Zuckerman et al., 1978); in the same study, men got higher scores than women on P and SSS. A replica study with Catalan subjects produced very similar results (Aluja and Torrubia, 1993). In another study (Weaver, 1991), which sought to explore the relationships between personality and media preferences, it was found that subjects with high scores on P displayed a strong preference for graphically violent horror movies.

Very recently, various studies using quasi-experimental designs have started to show that exposure to violent models may have different effects, depending on personality. Bushman (1995) found that videotape violence was more likely to increase aggression in high trait aggressive

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