Dominance and the Appeal of Violent Media

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Most work on violence in media has focused on the negative effects of exposure. Yet little research has examined why violent content should be appealing. The current work investigates the idea that it is not the violence, per se, that is appealing, but rather the depiction of domination by the protagonist. We further investigate the idea that the violence can actually lower enjoyment due to the violation of norms of appropriate behavior. We test these ideas in two studies that manipulate domination and violence (Study 1) and the applicability of relevant social norms (Study 2).

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Nearly all of the work on violent media has focused on the negative effects of exposure, with frequent calls to restrict its availability.
Much of this work, however, appears to overlook the popularity of such media. Violent video games, for example, account for nearly forty percent of sales in an industry that is now larger than the film industry (Entertainment Software Association 2009). Six of the top ten grossing movies in 2008 included notable violent content (IMDb 2010), and seventy percent of the most commonly viewed television contains violent content (National Television Violence Study 1998). In short, while much research has investigated the consequences of exposure to violent media, very little has examined why it should be so appealing.

The current work aims to investigate one potential cause of the appeal of fictionalized violence—dominance. Violent depictions in popular media often involve the physical domination of one party by another. Research in evolutionary psychology and fundamental human motivations support the idea that there are likely intrinsic rewards associated with physical domination, especially for men. In ancestral environments, males that could physically dominate other males would gain preferential access to limited resources. The selection of related physical traits, especially size and strength, are obvious in the sexual dimorphism that exists between males and females. We would also expect the selection of corresponding psychological characteristics that foster such behaviors—namely, a need for dominance. In short, we believe that one important reason for the appeal of violent media stems from its close link to domination.

We further argue that the actual violence in media (the physical harm inflicted on one individual by another) may not be appealing at all. Sparks, Sherry, and Lubsen (1995), for example, found that a popular movie was enjoyed no less after all violent content was removed; and Hansen (1990) found that violent content in a music video actually lowered its appeal. Zillmann (1998) has further argued that violence is actually distressing to most individuals.

We agree that the harm inherent in violent depictions is likely to inspire largely negative reactions, but we would add that this is likely moderated by the extent to which the violence violates prescriptions based on relevant social norms. That is, violence that does not obviously violate social norms is likely to be less aversive than violence that does. Even so, we would not expect such violence to inspire positive reactions per se. In short, we investigate the possibility that reactions to violent depictions are generally negative. This effect should be mitigated when the violence is not considered inappropriate. Moreover, violence that conveys domination by the favored character may even inspire positive reactions (at least in male viewers).

Overall, the current work is designed to investigate the idea that violent depictions can be appealing, at least for men, when they culminate in protagonist domination. We also explore the idea that the violence itself is unappealing, primarily because it violates social norms of appropriate behavior. We conducted two studies to test these ideas. In the first, we manipulated the violence and protagonist domination depicted in a clip from a violent video game. In the second, we examined reactions to a scenario describing a violent incident across individuals and contexts where we expected different social norms to apply.

Study 1 was a 3 (Violence: No violence vs. Violence and High Protagonist Dominance vs. Violence and Low Protagonist Dominance) x 2 (Gender) between-subjects factorial design. Participants viewed one of three video clips constructed by the authors using footage from teaser-trailers, in-game cut scenes, and actual gameplay for a recently-released videogame. Clips were constructed by adding different additional footage to a common two and half minute non-violent segment. In each case, one minute of additional footage was interspersed that contained either non-violent footage, violent footage where the protagonist dominated (High Dominance), or violent footage where the protagonist was dominated (Low Dominance). The latter two clips were designed to be equally violent. The final clips used the same 30 second introduction, had a common soundtrack, and were three and a half minutes long. The primary dependent variable was attitude towards the videogame (measured by five items, α=.93).

ANOVA revealed main effects of both Gender and Violence and an interaction between the two (Fs(1, 154)=52.01, 3.90, and 3.36, ps<.001, .05, and .05). While men liked the game more than women (Ms=4.02 vs. 2.71), follow-up analyses within gender revealed that women liked the game less when it contained any violence (MNo_Violence=3.19 vs. MHigh_Dominance=2.36 vs. MLow_Dominance=2.60; post-hoc analyses revealed that only the first mean differed from each of the other two), whereas men liked the game less only when the protagonist was dominated (Ms=4.16 vs. 4.34 vs. 3.56; only the latter mean differed from each of the former two). Consistent with predictions, violent content did appear to lower attitudes, except in men when the violence portrayed high levels of protagonist domination.

Study 2 was a 2 (Situation: Real Life vs. Video Game) x 2 (Gamer Status: Regular Gamer vs. Non-Gamer) between-subjects factorial design in which participants were asked to read a brief description of a violent encounter that was ostensibly taken from either a newspaper article (Real Life) or a scene from a video game. Participants were categorized as gamers if they reported playing video games once a month or more (45%), and non-gamers if they indicated they played rarely or never (55%). The primary dependent variable was the extent to which participants considered the behavior acceptable (measured by four items, α=.82).

ANOVA revealed main effects of both the Situation and Gamer Status and an interaction between the two (Fs(1, 93)=97.16, 14.49, and 5.29, ps<.001, .001, and .05). Follow-up analyses showed that gamers found the behavior more acceptable than non-gamers in the context of a video game (Ms=4.24 vs. 2.79; F(1, 93)=20.37, p<.001), but not in real life (Ms=1.36 vs. 1.00; F(1, 93)=1.05, p>.30), suggesting that gamers held different norms for acceptable fictionalized behavior than non-gamers, but that these norms did not influence the norms they applied to actual behavior.

References