Consuming Violence: the Lived Experience

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Products and services that appeal to consumers through violence are widespread (e.g. violent video games, movies, musical lyrics, sports). Yet despite the prevalence of the consumption of violence, marketing research has largely neglected questions regarding the consumer side of consuming violence: why violence sells and what the consumption of violence means to consumers. To uncover participants’ feelings and meanings surrounding the consumption of violence this study uses the projective technique of collage creation. Preliminary analysis of collages is discussed.

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The Lived Experience of Consuming Violence

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Violence today is pervasive. The United States is currently in what might appear to be perpetual state of war. The threat of terrorism lurks behind many aspects of public life. Schools have become shooting grounds. In 2006 alone, more than 1.4 million violent crimes were reported to law enforcement agencies (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2007). February 2008 marked the expansion of prison population of the United States to an all time high of one percent of the population (Liptak, 2008). All of this is part of what has been termed a culture of violence. As a consumer society, this culture of violence translates to consumption. We consume media accounts of the violence reported above. Eighty-nine percent of the top video games contain violent content and the majority of this violence is of a serious nature (Media Education Foundation, 2005). Music lyrics, particularly music consumed by teens and young adults are rife with violent messages. Roughly two thirds of Hollywood films are rated R (Media Education Foundation, 2005). Violent sports such as football, ultimate fight club and dog fighting enjoy widespread patronage. Despite the prevalence of the consumption of violence, marketing research has largely neglected the consumer side of consuming violence: why violence sells and what the consumption of violence means to consumers.

Violence and its consumption is not a new phenomenon. Violence has been explained as a fundamental feature of all societies (Denzin, 1984). Using violence for entertainment has a long tradition in many societies (Pinker, 2007) and (1973). Modern sensibilities have changed and despite its prevalence, much of the world today publicly condemns and tries to minimize many forms of violence (Pinker, 2007). Accordingly, much of the research on violent consumption considers the consequences and effects of consuming violence (Allen et.al 1995, Bushman 1998, Bushman and Philips 2001, Felson 1996 (Grier, 2001)).

Researchers have found that viewing violent media primes aggression (Hogben 1998, Smith and Donnerstein 1998), increases hostile feelings (Anderson 1997, Bushman 1995) and serves as an antecedent of aggressive behavior (Anderson and Bushman 2002). Research also indicates that media influences perceptions of the consequences of violent actions (Poter and Smith 1999), and that certain personality traits are linked with favorable attitudes towards media violence (Bushman 1995, Aluja-Fabregat and Torrubia-Beltri1998). While there is relative agreement that the consumption of violence is correlated to aggressive behavior there is substantial debate regarding its causal effects and the role of additional factors (Grier, 2001). (For a review of research on this topic see the FTC’s Report, Marketing Violent Entertainment to Children, Appendix A, 2000) (Federal Trade Commission, 2000).

While it has been found that people voluntarily expose themselves to, and often search out, images of violence (Zuckerman and Little, 1986), research into the attraction of consuming violence has been understudied. Research suggests that violent video games appeal to adolescent males as safe environment to experiment with controversial emotions (Jansz 2005). In the context of hockey, researchers found that presence of violence correlates positively with higher attendance rates (Jones, Ferguson and Stewart 1993). Accordingly, much of the research on violent consumption considers the consequences and effects of consuming violence (Allen et.al 1995, Bushman 1998, Bushman and Philips 2001, Felson 1996 (Grier, 2001)).

To uncover participants’ feelings and meanings surrounding the consumption of violence this study uses the projective technique of collage creation. Projective techniques are useful for studying concepts that may be difficult to articulate or are uncomfortable topics of discussion (Rook, 1988; Zaltman, 1996). Because enjoying the consumption of violence may not be perceived as socially desirable, the projective approach is well suited for this study. Seventy-three participants recruited from an undergraduate consumer behavior course, each created a collage of what it means to consume violence and how it makes them feel. No materials were provided so that participants were free to use any material they chose in their collages. In addition to the collage created, all participants provided a short narrative explanation of their collage. Together, the collage and the narrative formed the text for analysis.

While this research is only at very early stage, preliminary analysis suggests that consumers feel conflicted by their consumption of violence. The consumption of violence is confrontational. The prevalence and appeal of consuming violence makes consumers feel trapped, and overrun, alone and powerless to resists the temptation of violence. They desire protection and escape. Yet it may be precisely these feelings of helplessness that lead consumers to feel empowered by violence. They describe their experience of consuming violence of one of human strength. And because they are consuming rather than enacting the violence, it is not a physical battle but a mental one. Living the experience of violent consumption results in feelings of triumph, against the violence consumed and ironically, against the societal pressures to consume it.

References