Buying Violence: Understanding the Appeal of Violence in Popular Media

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Violent media is popular, yet most work on the topic focuses on the consequences of exposure. We examine why violence should be appealing. We suggest that it is not the violence per se, that is appealing, but rather the other motives that it can satisfy. Across three experiments we demonstrate that men, but not women, will preferentially approach media with violent content; men, but not women, enjoy the dominative elements of violent depictions; and finally, that both men and women can enjoy the satisfaction of justice in violence. Without satisfaction of these motives, violent content appears to be disliked.

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Buying Violence: Understanding the Appeal of Violence in Popular Media

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Violent media is extremely popular. Nearly 70% of prime-time television contains violence (National Television Violence Study, 1998), and approximately 40% of all video games are rated for violent content (Entertainment Software Association, 2009). In 2008, six of the top ten grossing movies featured substantial violence (IMDb, 2010). Although less well documented, violence is a major theme in many popular books and music. In short, violence in media is endemic. Consequently, much of the work on this topic has focused on the effects of exposure. A great deal of research purports to demonstrate a variety of negative effects of exposure to violence, although there are good reasons to question the causal link (Freedman, 2002).

One feature of violent media has remained almost completely unexplored though – the reasons for its appeal. Patterns of spending suggest that consumers enjoy violent media, but research on the topic is scant. What research has manipulated violent content and measured viewer enjoyment has shown either negative or no effects of violence (e.g. Hansen and Hansen, 1990; Sparks, Sherry, and Lubsen, 2005), consistent with Zillmann’s (1998) proposition that viewing violence is actually distressing. The purpose of the current work is to examine whether violent content is attractive to consumers and why.

We suggest that violence may be appealing – not due to pleasurable reactions to the depiction of harm by one person on another – but due to the role that violence plays in satisfying other consumer goals – in particular, dominance and justice. Research in evolutionary psychology (Cummins, 1996) and fundamental human motivations (McClelland, 1985) supports the notion that dominance, especially physical dominance, is likely to be intrinsically rewarding. The ability to physically dominate others, in men in particular, is likely to confer reproductive and survival advantages that favor the selection of corresponding physical and psychological characteristics. Although not often referenced in definitions of violent content (e.g. Anderson and Bushman, 2001), domination is often central to violent encounters – the encounter typically concludes with the domination of one party by another. We argue that vicarious reactions to the domination inherent in many violent depictions are one reason for its enjoyment.

Violence can serve other functions too. One notable function, especially in media depictions, is justice. Justice is an important motive in human interactions, the achievement of which should be inherently satisfying. As such, justice may be one of the reasons for the appeal of violence. Violence that allows the satisfaction of justice should be preferred to violence enacted for other reasons. We test both of these ideas, as well as the question of whether consumers approach violence in media across three experiments.

**EXPERIMENT 1**

Experiment 1 was a 2 (Violence Level: High vs. Low) x 2 (Gender) between-subjects experiment designed to address the question of whether consumers preferentially approach media with violent content. We tested this by creating a synopsis of a wartime movie, loosely based on the film, “Bridge on the River Kwai”, and renamed “Complicity” to disguise the origin of the movie. All participants saw the same description, which focused on the plot and meaning of the movie, but included no reference to the violent content. We also included a short review of the movie, which we varied to manipulate perceptions of the extent of violent content. The reviews were identical except for the modification of two sentences to indicate the movie included scenes of realistic violence. The primary dependent variable was the extent to which participants thought they would enjoy the movie (four items, α = .93). An ANOVA revealed a Violence x Gender interaction (F(1, 91) = 8.92, p < .01) that indicated men thought they would enjoy the movie more when it appeared to be more violent (Ms = 5.66 vs. 4.67), whereas women thought they would enjoy it less (Ms = 3.58 vs. 4.39).

**EXPERIMENT 2**

Experiment 2 was designed to investigate the role of vicarious reactions to domination in the actual enjoyment of violent depictions. We included three experimental conditions: no violence, violence in which the protagonist dominated, and violence in which the protagonist was dominated. This resulted in a 3 (Violence) x 2 (Gender) between-subjects factorial design. Participants viewed one of three video clips of a recently released video game, “Resident Evil 5”. Clips were constructed using footage from teaser-trailers, in-game cut scenes, and actual
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gameplay. We created a common two and half minute non-violent segment to which we interspersed one minute of additional footage corresponding to the condition. All clips were designed to be equally exciting and the latter two clips were designed to be equally violent. The final clips used the same 30 second introduction, had a common (arousing) 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 a Gender by Violence interaction (F(2, 154) = 3.36, p < .05). Follow-up analyses within gender revealed that women liked the game less when it contained any violence (M_{No Violence} = 3.19 vs. M_{High Dominance} = 2.36 vs. M_{Low Dominance} = 2.60; only the first mean differed from the others), 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 the former). Violent content did appear to lower attitudes, except in men when the violence portrayed high levels of protagonist domination.

**EXPERIMENT 3**

Experiment 3 was designed to investigate the role of justice in the enjoyment of violence. Participants read a (made-up) passage from a book that described a scene of intense violence enacted by one man on another. Violence was manipulated by providing physical details of the violent acts versus simply naming the acts (e.g. “castration” versus a description of it). We manipulated the justice motive by including a very brief reference that suggested the “victim” was responsible for the death of the enactor’s wife, leading to a 2 (Violence) x 2 (Justified) x 2 (Gender) between-subjects design. The primary dependent variable was attitude towards the book (three items, α = .93). An ANOVA revealed a marginally significant three-way interaction (F(1, 95) = 2.81, p < .10). Follow-up analyses indicated that within men, higher levels of violence led to more positive attitudes only when the violence was justified (Ms = 3.60 vs. 2.52; F(1, 95) = 3.45, p < .07). Within women, attitudes towards the book were uniformly low, but increased with low levels of justified violence (Ms = 1.50 vs. 2.59; F(1, 95) = 6.27, p < .05).

Overall, our results suggest that men, but not women, approach violent content in media. The violence itself, however, appears to reduce enjoyment in both men and women unless it satisfies some other motive. Both men and women enjoyed violence that satisfied the justice motive, although they responded to quite different forms of violence. Men enjoyed extreme justified violence; women only enjoyed reduced forms of justified violence. Only men enjoyed vicarious domination, although it was, at least in our experiment, equally offset by negative reactions to the violence itself.

**REFERENCES**


**I Love Your Gucci Glasses, You Have Taste vs. I Love Your Joe Glasses, You are Smart**

The Role of Self Construal and Brand Status in Compliment Appreciation

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Compliments are conducive to social interactions and communications. Little research has been done to examine the psychological underpinnings of the observed cultural differences in compliment giving and acceptance. Even more scarce attention has been given to extend research on compliments to consumer contexts and study the impact of compliments related to brand usage on consumers’ evaluations and preferences of the focal brand. Our work set out to study cultural difference in compliment appreciation (Study 1) and further investigate its implications in brand usage contexts (Study 2 and 3).

**CULTURAL DIFFERENCE AND COMPLIMENT APPRECIATION**

Self construals are often used as a proxy to uncover cultural differences: how individuals classify or perceive themselves according to the constituted cultural values they follow (Singles & Brown, 2001). In North American culture, there is a reliance on the natural separateness of distinct persons. The normative imperative of this culture is to become independent from others and to determine and convey one’s unique attributes (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, see also Triandis, 1995). However, Asians cultures have interdependent self-concepts that emphasize the connectedness between themselves and others (Morris & Peng, 1994; Hong et al., 2000). North Americans, who typically have independent self-construals, are likely to view social compliments as a matter of personal choice, indicative of compliment givers’ genuine liking of self,