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Cassandra H. Muniz
Portland State University

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Does Reading Violent Books Increase Aggression? Perceptions of an Overlooked Medium

Cassandra Muniz | Portland State University



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Introduction

Despite there being decades of research into the effects of media violence, few studies have tested for a link between violent literature and aggression. Of those that have, there is evidence of positive correlations between reading stories with physical or relational aggression and being physically or relationally aggressive, respectively (Coyne et al., 2012; Stockdale et al., 2013).

Among media researchers, pediatricians, and parents, there is a high level of consensus that exposure to violent video games and movies can increase aggression in children. In contrast, there is a low level of agreement on whether violent literature can increase aggressive behavior (Bushman et al., 2015).

Research Question

To what degree do people believe that reading violent books affects aggression, and how do first- and third-person perceptions of the effect differ?

Hypotheses

H1: Participants will perceive violent books to have stronger effects on other adults' aggression than on their own

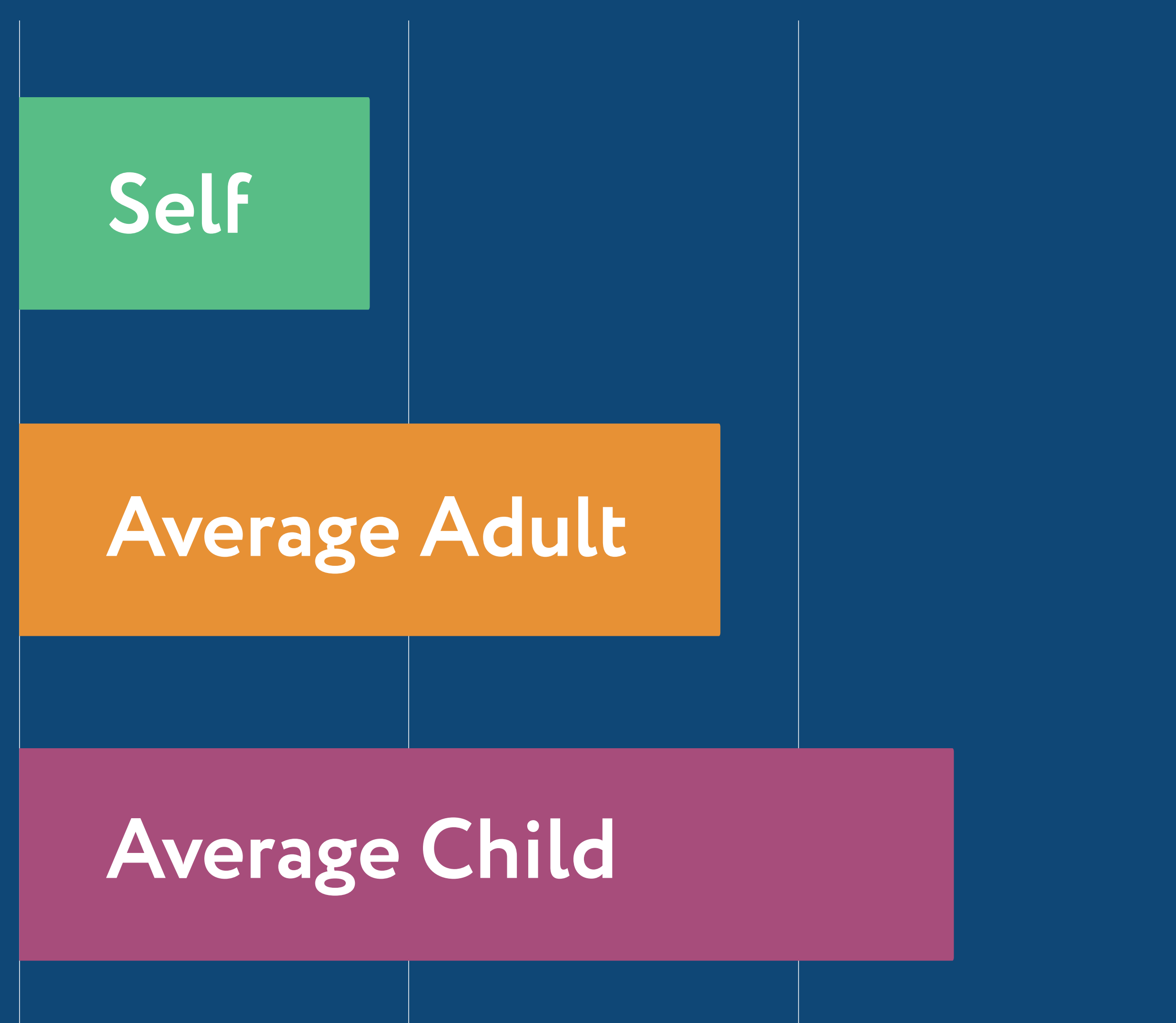
i.e., the third-person effect, which predicts that people will either underestimate effects on themselves or overestimate effects on their peers (Perloff, 2009)

H2: Participants will perceive violent books to have stronger effects on children's aggression than on adults' aggression

Methods

- Survey via Google Forms (87-item compilation of COMM 412/512 Media Effects students' research topics)
- Measures used for present study (with 1–7 Likert-type scale):
 - In the most recent week, how often did you read books with violent content?
 - How much do you think that your aggression is affected by reading violent books?
 - How much do you think that the average adult's aggression is affected by reading violent books?
 - How much do you think that the average child's aggression is affected by reading violent books?
- Participants ($N = 160$) recruited via convenience sampling
 - Eligibility: 18 or over and US resident
- Hypotheses tested by running two-tailed paired sample t tests (alpha level set at 0.05 *a priori*) in Google Sheets

Perceived Effects on Aggression



People think that reading violent books **affects the average adult's aggression more** than it affects their own.

People think that **children are more affected** by reading violent books than adults are.

Results

Media Use	Mean	Standard Deviation
Self	2.3	1.8

1 = Never 4 = Sometimes 7 = A Great Deal

Perceived Effects	Mean	Standard Deviation
Self	1.9	1.4
Average Adult	2.8	1.4
Average Child	3.4	1.6

1 = Not At All 4 = Somewhat 7 = Very Much

- Results statistically significant ($p < 0.001$)
- H1 and H2 both supported

Discussion

Media use findings suggest that people rarely read books with violent subject matter. Despite perceiving weak effects on average, people still believe they are less affected by the medium than other adults are—a third-person effect due to biases. Compared to adults, children are perceived to be more impressionable in regard to reading violent content.

Further research into parent vs. non-parent perceptions of effects on children may be of interest. Future studies should consider examining actual and perceived negative effects of not only conventional literature but also comic books, audiobooks, and other unique formats.

Limitations

- Participant recruitment produced sample skewed toward young and college-educated
- Terms “violent,” “aggression,” and “books” not explicitly defined in survey

References

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This study was conducted for COMM 512 Media Effects.

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