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

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

Cassandra Muniz  |  Portland State University

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

• Hypotheses tested by running two-tailed paired sample t-tests (alpha level set at 0.05 a priori) in Google Sheets.

• Measures used for present study (with 1–7 Likert-type scale):
  • “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

Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceived Effects</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Adult</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Child</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 = Not At All     4 = Somewhat    7 = A Great Deal

• Results statistically significant (p < 0.001)

• Hypothesis 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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Instructor: Dr. Lauren Frank
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