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Are Graphic Media Violence, Aggression and Moral Disengagement Related?

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Abstract

It is well established that violent media can increase levels of aggression. The present study aimed to examine whether cognitive distortions mediate the relationship between enjoyment of violent media and the frequency in which people are exposed to violent media, and whether this exposure to violent media mediates the relationship between cognitive distortions and levels of aggression. Eighty-six participants completed questionnaires assessing enjoyment of and frequent exposure to film and television violence, lyrical violence in music, and computer game violence. Participants were also assessed with respect to frequency of aggression and moral disengagement. Mediation analysis revealed partial mediation effects of moral disengagement regarding the relationship between enjoyment of violent media and the frequency of exposure to violent media; and full mediation effects of moral disengagement in the frequency of exposure to violent media–aggression relationship. The study emphasises the role that cognitive distortions such as moral disengagement play in digesting violent media, making it more acceptable and therefore increasing the likelihood of higher levels of aggression.
Are Graphic Media Violence, Aggression and Moral Disengagement Related?

Although it is impossible to know exactly what motives were involved in the school shootings such as the University of Texas massacre in 1966, the Columbine High School massacre in 1999 and the Virginia Tech massacre in 2007, a number of factors were probably involved. One possible contributing factor is violent media. Recent literature has documented that viewing violent media may be a contributing factor to the development of aggression. This has been shown with respect to television and films (e.g. Huesmann & Miller, 1994; Huesmann, Moise & Podolski, 1997; Huesmann, Moise-Titus, Podolski & Eron, 2003), music with violent song lyrics (e.g. Anderson, Carnagey & Eubanks, 2003; Rubin, West & Mitchell, 2001; Took & Weiss, 1994) accompanied with violent music videos (e.g. Hansen & Hansen, 1990; Johnson, Jackson & Gatto, 1995), and computer game violence (e.g. Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Anderson & Dill, 2000; Bushman & Anderson, 2002; Dill & Dill, 1998; Colwell & Payne, 2000). Evidence drawn from these studies has suggested that exposure to various types of violent media is causally related to aggression and violence in both the short and long term (e.g. Berkowitz, 1993; Bushman & Anderson, 2001). These studies highlight the fact that the amount of violent media that we are exposed to can be related to levels of aggression, and that the more we are exposed to violent media, the more we enjoy it and seek out more violent media as a consequence. However, literature has largely ignored the possibility that there are mediating variables involved in forming attitudes regarding violent media.

This study explores the possibility that the enjoyment created by frequent exposure to violent media results in cognitive distortions, such as, a more acceptable attitude towards violent media. Therefore, this study aims to explore the possibility that cognitive distortions mediate the relationships between frequent exposure to violent media, the enjoyment of violent media, and levels of aggression.
Often [media] violence that takes place in the context of a justifiable motive arouses more aggression than violence that takes place in the context of an unjustifiable motive (e.g. Berkowitz & Geen, 1966; Geen & Stonner, 1974). This increase in aggressive behaviour subsequent to watching 'justified' violence may occur because inhibitions against engaging in aggressive behaviour are weakened when the aggression is seen as justified (Geen, 1990). In the course of socialisation, people adopt moral standards that serve as guides and as major bases for self-sanctions regarding moral conduct (Bandura, 1999). In this process people monitor their conduct in certain conditions, judge it in relation to their moral standards and perceived circumstances, and regulate their actions by the consequences they apply themselves (Bandura, 2002). Thus, aggression inhibitors can sometimes be overridden (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara & Pastorelli, 1996; Keltner & Robinson, 1996; Bandura, 2001). Self-regulation and refraining from committing acts of violence is due, in part, to the fact that people cannot easily escape the moral standards that they apply to themselves (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). However, people with apparently normal moral standards sometimes behave reprehensibly towards others, and disengage from their normal moral standards (Bandura, 1999).

The cognitive distortion technique known as moral disengagement concentrates on cognitively restructuring inhumane conduct into a benevolent conduct by using up to eight mechanisms, namely moral justification, sanitising language, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, distortion of possible consequences, the attribution of blame, and dehumanisation (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, Pastorelli, and Regalia, 2001). High moral disengagers are often less prosocial and feel less guilty over detrimental conduct, both of which lessen the restraints over aggressive acts (Bandura, 2002). Selective activation and disengagement of internal control permits different types of conduct with the same moral standards (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara & Pastorelli, 1996).
Using the mechanisms of moral justification and advantageous comparison, people may justify acts of aggression and violence, as they may see themselves trying to combat ruthless others, as seen in films and in computer games. The violence in film media often takes place within a justifiable motive, which arouses more aggression (Berkowitz & Geen, 1966). Violent and aggressive conduct is made to appear morally acceptable and an effective way of dealing with certain situations and non-violent decisions are determined ineffective. By applying euphemistic labelling, aggression is camouflaged and this is imitated by people in real life situations as people verbally sanitise aggressive actions and behaviours. By using the mechanisms of displacement and diffusion of responsibility, people become passive, and do not see themselves as being the responsible agent of their actions. Self-censure will not be activated if the consequences of a persons actions are distorted. It seems likely that a high sense of personal responsibility is a weak restrainer of aggressive conduct when the aggressor does not see the harm their actions inflict on others. The mechanism of dehumanisation may reduce empathy for victims of aggressive acts. Bandura et al’s (1975) study showed that dehumanised individuals were treated more aggressively than people who were invested with human qualities, and graphically violent media portrayals of victims who have been dehumanised may be learnt as a script to use in certain situations. If scripts are encoded and learnt, it may serve as a guide for future behaviours that include conflicts similar to those portrayed. By attributing blame to the victim or to others, aggressive actions can be made personally excusable.

An individual’s perception of what is normal or acceptable behaviour may be changed through weakened inhibitions. The General Affective Aggression Model (GAAM) suggests that the creation and reinforcement of aggression-related knowledge structures and the desensitisation effects can change an individual’s personality (Anderson & Dill, 2000). Long-term consumers of violent media can become more aggressive in outlook, perceptual biases, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviour than they were before repeated exposure, or would have become without such exposure (Anderson
In exploring the relationship between enjoyment of violent media and the frequency in which we seek that violent media, cognitive distortion techniques such as moral disengagement can act as a way of digesting the violent media, making it less personally violent to us. That is, by employing moral disengagement mechanisms and therefore justifying the violence to make it personally acceptable, we may perceive the violence in various media outlets as less violent. Once violent media has become acceptable to us, frequency to exposure of violent media can become a mediating variable, as the acceptable attitude to violence in the media through cognitive distortion techniques can increase levels of aggression. The present study aims to examine whether moral disengagement mediates enjoyment of violent media leading to increased frequency of exposure to violent media. It also aims to examine whether moral disengagement is then mediated by this frequency of exposure to violent media (i.e. where more moral disengagement leads to the increasing levels of watching, listening to, and/or playing violent media), which in turn leads to higher levels of aggression.
Method

Participants:
Fifty-one male (M= 20.25, SD= 1.00) and thirty-five female (M= 21.30, SD= 5.01) business studies undergraduates were selected to participate. Participants were recruited using a convenience sampling technique.

Materials:
Frequency and Enjoyment of Violent Media Questionnaire: A questionnaire was designed to assess the frequency of participant’s exposure to, and enjoyment of violent and non-violent media. Film, music, and computer game media were assessed. Violent film media was classed as horror, martial arts, and science fiction. These genre of films frequently show scenes of violence, and are often only suitable for persons of 15 or 18 years and over due to the graphic violent content. Heavy metal songs and rap songs have themes of extreme rebellion, violence, suicide, homicide, substance abuse, sexual promiscuity, perversion and Satanism, and were therefore classed as violent music media. Beat-em-up/fighting and shoot-em-up computer games were classed as the violent media in this category. Games of this nature usually involve violence as the player takes on the role of either physically fighting or shooting at victims in the game. Participants were given an example of each genre of film, music and game to avoid confusion over categories. Participants detailed how often they viewed, listened to or played each genre of film, music or computer game. To assess enjoyment, participants rated on a 5 point Likert scale how much they enjoyed realistic and unrealistic (‘splatter’) violence in films and in computer games. Participants were also asked if they found explicit song lyrics pleasurable or disturbing. These items were surrounded by a number of foils. Participants were to write beside each genre of film, music and game category the frequency of watching, listening and playing of each genre. Responses included time frames (daily, weekly, fortnightly, monthly, yearly, never) and adjectives (always, often, frequently, very little, rarely, hardly ever, never).
The Aggression Questionnaire (Buss & Perry, 1992) was used to measure aggression. This is a 29 item instrument that shows high internal consistency, reliability, and test-retest stability and measures four factors of physical aggression (α=.85), verbal aggression (α=.72), anger (α.83), and hostility (α.77), that are intercorrelated strongly enough to indicate an overall trait of aggression but leave enough room for the separate factors. Physical and verbal aggression are correlated to include the instrumental and motor components of hurt and harm to others, anger includes the emotional and effective component with physiological arousal and preparedness for aggression, and hostility incorporates the cognitive components of ill will, resentment and suspicion. The four factors are sufficiently related to form a general, high order factor of aggression with total Cronbach’s alpha of .89. Participants rate each item to correspond with how characteristic each trait is of them, using a 5 point Likert scale.

The Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement Questionnaire (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara & Pastorelli, 1996) is a scale which contains 32 items with each of the 8 moral disengagement mechanisms represented by 4 items. Participants rate their degree of acceptance of moral exonerations for transgressive conduct using a 5 point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. Scores can range from 32 – 170, with higher scores signifying high levels of moral disengagement and lower scores signifying lower levels of moral disengagement. Cronbach’s alpha was .82 for a composite measure of moral disengagement.

Data Coding:
Correlations were used to examine the violent media variables correlated highly with each other, and this was found to be graphic violence in films and in computer games. Participants were then assigned to either enjoyment of violent media (frequent exposure), or non-enjoyment of violent media (non-frequent exposure). The relationship between explicit song lyrics and verbal aggression is to be analysed separately.
Results

First, the mean score for moral disengagement was 84.77 (SD=21.6) and the mean score for aggression levels was 85.55 (SD=19.24). There were no significant effects found for gender, therefore this was not examined further.

Second, to examine whether moral disengagement mediated the influence of enjoyment of violent media on the frequency of exposure to violent media, mediation analysis was conducted (see Figure 1).

All four criteria of mediation analysis were met (Tabachnick & Fiddell, 1996). Enjoyment of violent media had a significant bivariate relationship with moral disengagement ($\beta = .556, p<.001$) and with frequency of exposure to violent media ($\beta = .606, p<.001$); and moral disengagement predicted frequency independently of enjoyment ($\beta = .415, p=.001$). When controlling for moral disengagement, enjoyment also had a significant effect on frequency ($\beta = .343, p<.001$). These results are consistent with partial mediation, and the Sobel z-test of mediation was found to be significant ($z=3.48, p<.001$). Therefore, this suggests that moral disengagement partially mediates the enjoyment of and frequency of exposure to violent media relationship.
Third, to examine whether moral disengagement mediated the influence of frequency of viewing violent media on aggression, a second mediation analysis was conducted (see Figure 2).

All four criteria of mediation analysis (Tabachnick & Fiddell, 1996). Frequency to exposure had a significant bivariate relationship with moral disengagement ($\beta = .574, p<.001$) and with aggression ($\beta = .523, p < .001$); and frequency predicted aggression independently of moral disengagement ($\beta = .730, p < .001$). When controlling for frequency of exposure, there was no significant effect found ($\beta = .104, p = .203$). These results are consistent with full mediation, and the Sobel z-test of mediation was found to be significant ($z = 5.24, p < .001$). Therefore, this suggests that moral disengagement does mediate the frequency of exposure to violent media and aggression relationship.

**Discussion**
The aims of this study were to investigate whether moral disengagement mediated the relationship between enjoyment and frequency of exposure to violent media; and also whether moral disengagement mediates the relationship between frequency to exposure to violent media and aggression. Mediation effects were found to be significant, with partial mediation found in the first analysis and full mediation effects in the second analysis. This therefore suggests that aggression can be made personally and socially acceptable by cognitively restructuring the moral value of violence and aggression. The partial mediation results in the first analysis suggest that moral disengagement may be facilitating the relationship between enjoying violent media, and seeking out violent media more frequently, however, the relationship between enjoying violent media and frequency is strong even without the facilitating effect of moral disengagement. The full mediation analysis in the second analysis suggests that moral disengagement acts as a mediator, whereby increased frequency of exposure to violent media, which through the use of moral disengagement in turn leads to increased aggression levels.

Findings replicate that of previous research that states exposure to violent media does increase aggression (e.g. Huesmann & Miller, 1994; Took & Weiss, 1994; Rubin, West & Mitchell, 2001; Dill & Dill, 1998; Anderson & Dill, 2000; Colwell & Payne, 2000; Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Anderson, Carnagey & Eubanks, 2003; Huesmann, Moise-Titus, Podolski & Eron, 2003). However, it adds to it by suggesting that the exposure to violent media may facilitate aggressive levels by cognitively distorting the moral context of the violence.

Frequent exposure to graphically violent media may be a contributing factor to the development of an aggressive personality, by using cognitive distortions such as moral disengagement. The present study found that the enjoyment of violent media leads to more frequent exposure to violent media further, as the frequency of watching violent media increases more moral
disengagement occurs resulting in an increase the likelihood of aggressive responses in certain situations.

The association between violent media and aggression is consistent with a developmental model in which frequent exposure to violent media can contribute to the creation of an aggressive personality. Bushman and Anderson (2001) stated that individual differences in aggressiveness interact with the presence of violent stimuli in the elicitation of related aggressive thoughts, emotional states and action tendencies. They postulate that they may have found differences in their results due to participants’ individual differences. Therefore it is possible that highly aggressive people may manifest aggressive responses to violent cues more than less aggressive people through distorted cognitions. Individual differences in aggressiveness are generally measured by personality tests, therefore to control for individual differences, future research could include such tests. Huesmann’s (1986) theory and research on television violence suggests that frequent exposure to violent media should have detrimental effects on many aspects of life, such as academic achievement, socialisation, and delinquent behaviours.

The more people enjoy watching graphically violent media and listening to songs which contain explicit lyrics, the more they will actively seek it out, and according to Anderson and Bushman (2002), long-term consumers of violent media can become more aggressive in behaviour before repeated exposure, or would have become without such exposure. Through the use of cognitive distortion techniques, people may learn hostile perception, attribution, and expectation biases, callous attitudes, and how to disengage from normal empathic reactions. The implications of this are that these attitudes may become so digested and over-learned that they are applied automatically with little effort or awareness. Aggressive ideas suggested in violent media may prime other aggressive ideas as postulated by Berkowitz (1984), and frequent exposure can make aggression networks stronger.
Consumers of violent media need to be aware of the potential effects that viewing violent media can have on the digestion of distorted attitudes towards violence. Because violence sells, there will always be violence in the media and therefore it is important to inform the public regarding the impact of long term effects: warnings must be made precisely clear and unambiguous. Consumers need to be aware of the ease in which people may be readily prepared to morally disengage in order to allow digestion of violent media, which in turn can lead to higher levels of aggression. Future research may examine justifiable, versus non justifiable, violence in more depth to see if it is the media makers who are responsible for the primary disengagement, or if for those who enjoy violent media, their minds make it ‘justifiable’ irrespective of plotlines. It may be a great irony if it is found that media makers who promote only justifiable violence may be having a greater effect on aggression than those ‘irresponsible’ media makers who promote grotesque violence for the sake of it, with no justification whatsoever. As Bandura (1999) states, it should be made difficult for people to remove humanity from their conduct. But with the increased popularity of violent media, it seems that it has actually become easier. In violent media, the victims may be actors, the blood may be fake and the bullets blanks, but for some people the image portrayed is all too real.

References
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