

The Relation Between Media Violence Exposure and Finding Humor in Media Violence

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Abstract

In the last few decades, research on media violence and desensitization has shown the positive and negative effects that it can have on people. Researchers know exposure to media violence can desensitize people over time, making them “numb” to portrayals of violence. What researchers do not yet understand is how media violence exposure might relate to having a positive reaction to violence in the media—specifically, laughing at it. This study measured the relation between media violence exposure and finding humor in media violence. For the secondary hypothesis, the relation between justified media violence and finding humor in media violence was measured. At a large Midwestern University, a cross-sectional survey with 184 participants was conducted. The results showed that people with high exposure to video game violence were more likely to find humor in violent content. Similarly, people with high exposure to TV violence were more likely to find humor in violent content as well. The results also showed there was a moderate, positive correlation between exposure to justified TV violence and finding humor in TV violence. As for video game violence, there was a lower positive correlation between exposure to justified video game violence and finding humor in video game violence. Overall, there was a positive relation between media violence exposure and finding humor in media violence. These findings show that future research is needed to examine the causal relation between media violence exposure and finding humor in media violence. Determining the causation would help discover what effects desensitization to media violence has on people.

Keywords: Media, Violence, Humor

1. Introduction

Many aspects of media violence and desensitization to violence have already been thoroughly researched. There is an abundance of evidence that the more frequently a person consumes violent media, whether it be violent video games, violent movies, or violent television shows, the more desensitized to violence they become. When a person is desensitized to media violence, they feel “numb” to portrayals of violence and have little-or-no empathy towards others. However, the topic of finding humor in violence is often overlooked.

1.1. Desensitization

Desensitization to media violence may play an important role in understanding the concept of finding humor in media violence. People become desensitized to media violence after repeated exposure to media violence. Once desensitized to media violence, people are not bothered by the violence and start to have less empathy for others. Engelhardt, Bartholow, Kerr and Bushman examined participant’s aggression levels after being desensitized to media violence¹. Desensitization was assessed via electroencephalogram (EEG) during the study. Participants played a video game (either

violent or non-violent), repeatedly viewed violent and non-violent photos, then completed a competitive reaction time task (which measured aggression). These researchers found that participants with low exposure to media violence, became desensitized to real-life violence and became more aggressive after playing violent video games during the study. Their research also showed that participants high in media violence exposure were not affected by playing violent video games during the study. However, participants with prior high exposure to media violence still had the same level of aggression as the participants with prior low exposure to media violence.

Similar research conducted by Fanti, Vanman, Henrich, and Avraamides aimed to examine the effects of aggression caused by desensitization to media violence². Participants in their study repeatedly watched different violent clips and humorous clips to desensitize them to both media violence and comedy scenes. The idea was to test to see if participants can become desensitized to other forms of media, not just media violence. They found that highly aggressive individuals enjoyed the media violence more. In addition, highly aggressive individuals reported less sympathy for victims. As for becoming desensitized to comedy, participants found less enjoyment in the comedy scenes after repeatedly viewing multiple comedy scenes. The researchers suggest that desensitization might affect comedy differently since the relation was different than becoming desensitized to media violence. Desensitization to media violence can occur in short- and long-term exposure to media violence, by how numb people are becoming to violence may be an important precursor in finding humor in it.

1.2. Schadenfreude

Finding humor in media violence is when a person finds the violent acts or scenes in movies, television shows, or video games to be humorous. Typically, these viewers find humor in the violent scenes when a character is seriously injured or dies. This type of humor relates to the German word “schadenfreude.” Schadenfreude is “satisfaction or pleasure felt at someone else’s misfortune”³. Since little research has been done on schadenfreude and the media; Lange and Boecker’s research on schadenfreude in the real world was used to see if their findings apply to the media. According to Lange and Boecker, schadenfreude usually occurs when a person (a) strongly dislikes, (b) is envious of, or (c) feels inferior towards another person⁴. This could possibly be why a person would find enjoyment in media violence—especially, justified media violence. Justified media violence is when the person views the violent acts as “justifiable” or believes that violence was the only viable solution in a given situation. A way to explain how justified media violence relates to schadenfreude is with superhero violence. Generally, in superhero movies, there is a villain who is torturing or putting the hero through a lot of pain. This causes the hero to rise up and take down the villain using violence. Thus, the bad behavior of the villain is sufficient to justify the violence against that villain. In relation to schadenfreude, if a person associates themselves with the superhero, they would possibly find satisfaction or humor when violent acts are committed against the villain.

The relation between schadenfreude and empathy is not often researched. Empathy plays an important role because of how it relates to desensitization to media violence. If a person is desensitized, they have little-to-no empathy towards others. If schadenfreude is positively related to desensitization, then it should be negatively related to empathy. A meta-analysis conducted by Anderson et al., found that exposure to video game violence is negatively correlated with empathy and prosocial behavior and positively correlated with desensitization⁵. If a person is showing signs of desensitization, it is unsurprising that they would have low levels of empathy and prosocial behavior. In a prosocial video game study, Brauer, Greitemeyer, and Osswald compared the empathy and schadenfreude of people who played prosocial and violent video games⁶. They found that prosocial gameplay was associated with higher empathy and lower schadenfreude. These two studies reinforce the idea that exposure to media violence leads to desensitization and decreases in empathy.

Because finding humor in media violence has not been thoroughly researched, there is little specific background information relating to the topic. The idea of using schadenfreude as background knowledge to predict our hypotheses came about due to the similarity between schadenfreude and the concept of finding humor in media violence. Schadenfreude was also used because people prone to schadenfreude have low levels of empathy which is similar to being desensitized to media violence. The main idea is that people who are desensitized to media violence will be more likely to find humor in media violence.

1.3. Hypothesis

With most research on desensitization and media violence revolving around what causes “numbness” to violence, we wanted to explore another way in which desensitization may affect a person’s emotional response to violence—specifically, finding it humorous. Becoming numb to media violence prevents (or blunts) negative emotional reactions

but laughing at media violence is a *positive* emotional reaction and thus serves as a more extreme indicator of desensitization than numbing alone. Based on the reliable positive relation found between media violence exposure and desensitization, we expected media violence exposure to be positively related to finding humor in media violence. Additionally, because *schadenfreude* often involves some form of justification for the harm befalling victims (even if it is simple dislike for the victim), we predicted that exposure to *justified* media violence would also be positively related to finding humor in media violence.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

At a large Midwestern University, 184 participants were recruited to complete an online questionnaire. For gender, 59% of the participants were female ($N = 108$). The age of the participants ranged from 18 years old to 35 years old ($M = 19.74$, $SD = 1.99$).

2.2. Stimuli and Equipment

Participants completed the online questionnaire via the department of psychology's participant pool. All entry level psychology courses require student to complete research credit to receive a passing grade for the class. For this study, partial course credit was given to participants as compensation for completing the questionnaire. Participants completed the online questionnaire on their own time using their computer or mobile device.

2.3. Procedure

This study was cross-sectional. The survey consisted of questions regarding: video games, television shows, relationships, personality traits, and sexual behaviors. This study focused on video game and television exposure – how violent the content is that they consume, if they view the violence as justified, and if they found humor in the media violence. The survey questions used for this study to measure media violence exposure, justification of media violence, and finding humor in media violence were all from a study by Gentile, Lynch, Linder, and Walsh⁷.

Looking more in depth at the video game questions, participants answered questions on their three favorite video games. The participant rated how frequently they play each game (“How often do you play this game?”), their answers were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = once a month or less, 2 = 2-3 times per month, 3 = once per month, 4 = 2-4 times per week, 5 = 5 or more times per week). To measure violent content for each game, participants rated how often violence occurred (“How often do characters try to physically injure each other in this video game?”), participants rated their answers on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = never/not at all; 7 = all the time/very much). The participants rated how justified they believed the violence was for each game (“To what extent do you feel that harming other characters in this game is justified?” and “To what extent do you feel that the main character in this game has a right to harm enemies?”), participants rated their answers on the same 7-point Likert scale (1 = never/not at all; 7 = all the time/very much). After evaluating their three favorite video games, the participants answered two questions on finding humor in the video games they play (“Do you ever find yourself laughing at the violent events within the games you play?” and “To what extent is the violence funny in the games you play?”), these questions were also rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = never; 7 = all the time).

As for the television show questions, participants answered questions on their three favorite television shows⁵. The participants rated how frequently they watched each television show (“How often do you watch this show?”) and answers were selected on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = once a month or less, 2 = 2-3 times per month, 3 = once per month, 4 = 2-4 times per week, 5 = 5 or more times per week). Next, participants rated how often violence occurred in each show (“How often do characters try to physically injure each other in this show?”), participants rated their answers on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = never/not at all; 7 = all the time/very much). The participants rated how justified they believed the violence was for each show (“To what extent do you feel that harming of characters in this show is justified?” and “To what extent do you feel that the main character in this show has a right to harm enemies?”), their answers were rated on the same 7-point Likert scale (1 = never/not at all; 7 = all the time/very much). Once they evaluated their three favorite television shows, they rated if they found humor in the violent content in the shows they watch (“Do you ever find yourself laughing at violent events within the shows you watch?” and “To what extent is

the violence funny in the shows you watch?"), these questions were also rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = never; 7 = all the time).

To analyze the results, each favorite video game and television show were considered separately when calculating the exposure scores. For favorite video game one, the frequency of playing the video game was multiplied by how violent the game was rated by the participant. This was also done for favorite video games two and three. Once the violence exposure scores for each favorite video game was found, those results were taken to find the average video game violence exposure [(VG1 violence exposure + VG2 violence exposure + VG3 violence exposure)/3]. The same analysis was done for finding the average television violence exposure. To analyze the first favorite television show, the frequency of watching the show was multiplied by how violent the television show was rated by the participant. This was repeated for both favorite television shows two and three. With the violence exposure scores for television shows one, two, and three, these results were taken to find the average exposure to television violence [(TV1 violence exposure + TV2 violence exposure + TV3 violence exposure)/3]. For analyzing exposure to justified video game violence, the same three favorite video games and each of their frequencies for playing the games were used. For each favorite video game, the two justification of video game violence questions were averaged [(VG1 justified question 1 + VG1 justified question 2)/2], etc. for each video game]. To find exposure to justified violence for favorite video game one, the frequency of playing the game was multiplied by how justified the violence was rated by the participant. The same analysis was done for favorite video games two and three. Next, the three favorite video game exposure to justified violence results were used to find the average exposure to justified video game violence [(VG1 justified violence exposure + VG2 justified violence exposure + VG3 justified violence exposure)/3]. Once again, the same analysis was done to find the average exposure to justified television violence. For each favorite television show, the two justification of television violence questions were averaged [(TV1 justified question 1 + TV1 justified question 2)/2], etc. for each television show]. For favorite television show one, the frequency of viewing the show was multiplied by how justified the violence was rated by the participant. The same analysis was done for favorite television shows two and three. The results for the three favorite television shows exposure to justified violence, were used to calculate the average exposure to justified television violence [(TV1 justified violence exposure + TV2 justified violence exposure + TV3 justified violence exposure)/3]. To analyze finding humor in video game violence results, the two humor in video game violence questions were averaged [(VG humor 1 + VG Humor 2)/2]. Lastly, to analyze the finding humor in television violence results, the two humor in television violence questions were averaged [(TV humor 1 + TV humor 2)/2].

3. Results

We predicted there would be a positive relation between: (a) media violence exposure and finding humor in media violence, and (b) justified media violence exposure and finding humor in media violence.

For the first main hypothesis concerning the relation between exposure to media violence and finding humor in media violence, the television and video game variables were analyzed separately. The relation between exposure to television violence and finding humor in television violence was positive, $r(173) = .42, p < .001$. This means that as the amount of violent television exposure increased, so too did the extent to which participants found television violence humorous. For exposure to video game violence and finding video game violence humorous, the results also showed a positive correlation, $r(164) = .36, p < .001$. Thus, people with high exposure to video game violence were more likely to find humor in violent video game content.

The second hypothesis concerning the relation between exposure to justified media violence and finding humor in media violence, the television and video game variables were also analyzed separately. There was a positive correlation between exposure to justified television violence and finding humor in television violence, $r(172) = .43, p < .001$. As justification of television violence increased, finding humor in television violence also increased. For exposure to justified video game violence and finding humor in video game violence, results showed a positive correlation, $r(162) = .37, p < .001$. As justification of video game violence increases, finding humor in video game violence increases as well.

Looking at variables beyond the two hypotheses, an analysis was conducted on the relation between exposure to media violence and exposure to justified media violence. There was a positive correlation between exposure to television violence and exposure to justified television violence, $r(172) = .89, < .001$. As exposure to violent television shows increased, so too did the extent to which participants justified the violent television content. Similarly, the relation between exposure to video game violence and exposure to justified video game violence, had a positive correlation, $r(162) = .94, p < .001$. Meaning that people with high exposure to video game violence also believed the

violent content was justified. These variables were calculated in a very similar way, however, so the strong correlations are partially due to this.

4. Discussion

We hypothesized that because of the positive relation between media violence exposure and desensitization to media violence that there would be a similar relation between media violence exposure and finding humor in media violence. Also looking into the aspect of *schadenfreude*, we believed there would be a positive relation between media violence exposure and justification of media violence as well. We found that exposure to media violence (in the form of watching television or playing video games) was significantly related to finding humor in the same type of media (television or video games).

The positive correlation between finding humor in television violence and television violence exposure is possibly due to how violence is portrayed in television. Depending on the genre of the show, violence is often portrayed as comical; over time possibly changing how humorous the television violence is. As for finding humor in video game violence and video game violence exposure, the type of video games frequently played could influence whether a person finds humor in media violence. Some genres glorify violence and justify the violent acts being committed, but most do not add humor to the violence. Television and video game violence can be portrayed as the same, either humorous, gruesome, or humorous and gruesome, but with television shows and video games usually being portrayed differently, it can affect how each viewer sees the content.

For the justification of media violence hypothesis, both television and video game results could be affected by the type of media content the person frequently views. With there being many different television and video game genres, violence can be framed very differently depending on the story the authors are trying to tell. In most television shows, movies, or video games, the story frequently encourages viewers to view the violence of protagonists as justifiable. There is a possibility that the more people are exposed to justified media violence, the more the viewer will start to justify violence in other contexts. However, if the viewer does not watch justified violent content, they probably do not see the violence as justifiable even in contexts where it is framed to be justifiable.

These results could help explain how someone starts to justify media violence. Having a moderate-to-strong relation between how much media violence is viewed and the viewer justifying media violence, could potentially mean that the more a person views violent media, the more likely they will start to justify media violence. Since the study did not measure *schadenfreude* directly, we cannot say if there is a relation between Lange and Boecker's three variables (strongly dislikes, is envious of or feels inferior towards another person) and to finding humor in media violence. There is a possibility that *schadenfreude* does occur since people with exposure to justified media violence found humor in media violence, but future research is needed to examine this relation.

A main limitation to our study is that it is a correlational study. Correlational studies are not able to identify causation among the variables. Other third variables are possibly influencing the results. The person's personality traits might influence if they find violent content humorous. If a person is high in sadism, they could possibly find more humor in the violence than a person high in narcissism. The genre of television shows or video games a person consumes could possibly affect how they perceive media violence or even justify it. A person might feel more inclined to find violent content more humorous when they watch the content with their friends. If the person frequently watches violent content with their friends and laugh at the violence, this could influence how they view the content.

Follow-up studies would benefit from incorporating dark personality traits (Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy, sadism, spite, and *schadenfreude*) to see if these variables relate to finding humor in media violence. Dark personality traits would relate to finding humor in media violence since at some level these traits put others through physical or psychological pain in different ways. Other work could examine whether different humor styles also predict whether people find humor in media violence.

Overall, the results showed that there was a positive relation between exposure to media violence (justified or otherwise) and finding humor in media violence. This means that the more exposure a person has to media violence, the more likely they will find humor in media violence. Similarly, the more a person justifies media violence, the more likely they will find humor in media violence. With the study being correlational, a follow-up experimental study is needed to examine the causation of finding humor in media violence.

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