

## **Background**

I have been a devoted fan of movies since I was in middle school, and science fiction films are my truest love. These films take the audience to a different world full of fantasy and excitement. Since my father took me to the movie theater for the first time when I was seven, I have never been able to resist the temptation to follow these films' lead and experience another life as the protagonist. Seeing the characters growing, exploring, fighting against villains, and saving the world, I can hardly find any other moments which easily make me feel touched and heroic. Nevertheless, it results in a serious question that has been constantly asked by the public: Will film violence lead to aggressive behaviors in real life, especially for teenagers who are more susceptible to outside influences? With my long-time affection for movies and this controversial topic in mind, I decided to explore if there is a relationship between fictional film violence and real-life aggressive behaviors.

## **Research questions**

Can film violence increase the possibilities of the audience to engage in aggressive behaviors in real life? If so, how does film violence exert this influence?

[How do different communities communicate the consequences of film violence to the general public?](#)

## **Methods**

My approach to researching the question is to analyze two academic articles on this topic but from two different fields. One is a sociology paper titled "Film Violence and Subsequent Aggressive Tendencies", and the other one is a psychology research report titled "Comfortably Numb: Desensitizing Effects of Violent Media on Helping Others". In this project, I will compare and explore their similarities and differences through a grounded theory research method. Moreover, I will conduct an interview with my

cousin who is also a passionate movie fan, and analyze his perspective of view of film violence. Through comparing the different perspectives of sociologists, psychologists, and my cousin who stand for the view of teenagers, I will discuss how different communities communicate this topic.

### **Text Analysis: Sociology**

The article titled “Film Violence and Subsequent Aggressive Tendencies” reports an experiment of sociology which was conducted by Berkowitz, Corwin and Heironimus.

In the introduction, the authors briefly discuss the background of the longtime debate of the influence that film violence can exert on the aggressive behaviors of the audience.

There are two main arguments of this topic: some argued film violence incites crime and juvenile delinquency, while on the opposite side of the argument, some claimed that such fantasy aggression often has socially beneficial effects by providing safe and vicarious outlets. Then the authors summarize some former experiments conducted and conclude that “the mass media probably do not have much of a role in the development of persistent criminal and delinquent characteristics”, there has been different

laboratory investigations support both the prosecution and defense of movie violence instigating subsequent aggressive behavior. Therefore, “what are the conditions determining whether media violence will increase or decrease the likelihood of subsequent aggressive behavior?” has become the key question to address the topic. By

comprehensively introducing a former experiment conducted by Berkowitz, who is also the author of this article, and Rawlings, the authors explains its rationale, procedures, results and significances. Berkowitz and Rawlings divided male and female college students into two groups, which respectively received anger-arousing insults and neutral treatment from a male test administrator. All of them were presented a prize

fight scene from a movie in which the protagonist was taking a bad beating. However,

half of both the angered and non-angered group were told in advance that the protagonist was a “downright scoundrel” so the aggression was more justified, while the other half were told that he was a “victim of unfortunate circumstances” so he was not essentially a “bad guy”. As a result, they concluded from questionnaire filled out by the subjects after seeing the film scene that among the angered subjects those who regarded the fight scene a more justified aggression generally expressed stronger hostility toward the insulting test administrator, and those who regarded the fight scene a less justified aggression were inhibited and tended to exhibit hostility toward the experiment rather than the test administrator.

The experiment poses a problem for social regulation of media violence as it may lead to socially harmful consequences that the audience who saw justified aggression might seek the same in real life, at least immediately after seeing the violent scenes. Due to these implications, the authors repeat and extend this former experiment by exerting four additional controls in order to draw more accurate conclusions. Firstly, their subject were all male college students instead of male and female college students in the former experiment. In this way, they eliminate the gender factor which can possibly influence the results. Secondly, they divided both of their angered and non-angered subjects into three groups, and one of group is shown a neutral film, so that they can assess if aggression film itself had any anger-arousing effects. Thirdly, in order to determine what hostility is aroused generalize to people other than the test administrator who insulted the subjects in the angered conditions. Fourthly, they arranged two test administrators: one insults the subjects in the angered conditions, and the other gives neutral treatment to all subjects. In this way, they aim to compare the hostility-displacement effect on angered, non-angered and neutral groups when shown justified and non-justified aggression.

When the authors describe the methods, the procedures are indeed demonstrated in a detailed and comprehensive way as they illustrate the rationale behind each designed procedure, explain the purpose of each step, and evaluate the probable limitations of the results. They demonstrate their main dependent variables which were questions in three questionnaires given to all the subjects immediately after the movie scenes. The authors also evaluate these designed questions and compare them to those in the former experiment.

In the section to present the results, the authors divide them into two parts: reactions to the movie, and attitudes toward the researchers. By utilizing tables of data, the authors clearly demonstrated the validity of the results obtained from former experiments. Furthermore, after comparing the results with those of the earlier experiment by Berkowitz and Rawlings, the authors confirm that the conclusions of Berkowitz and Rawlings are still valid under less variables and more restrictions. They also manage to obtain understanding of the consequence of justified violent scenes on the audience aggressive behaviors in real life.

At last, the authors draw conclusions in one short paragraph in which present the audience a clear and straightforward results: film violence is highly likely to increase the probability that the audience will behave aggressively in a later situation. Moreover, the socially justified fantasy aggression might weaken the restraints against hostility in angered audience members, and thus, it would be more possible for them to appear aggressive to those who they regard deserve punishment shortly after seeing the movie.

### **Text Analysis: Psychology**

The psychological article titled “Comfortable Numb: Desensitizing Effects of Violent Media on Helping Others” is written by Brad J. Bushman and Craig A. Anderson.

In the abstract which is only one-paragraph long, the authors briefly inform the audience of the purpose, structure, general content and the final conclusion of this essay: in order to test the hypothesis that exposure to violent media reduces aid offered to people in pain, two studies were conducted. In the first study, after playing violent or nonviolent video games, the participants heard a loud fight outside the lab while completing a lengthy questionnaire. In the second study, violent- and nonviolent- movie attendees witnessed a young woman with an injured struggle to pick up her crutches outside the theater either before or after the movie. It took longer for those who played violent video games and saw violent movies to help, which led to the conclusion that violent media make people numb to the pain and suffering of others. Moreover, by presenting a quote describing the power and the possible danger of movies before the introduction, the authors not only imply their negative attitudes towards violent films, but also begin this academic article with a sense of artistic aesthetics, which renders the essay more attractive even to those who have not much knowledge in psychology.

In the introduction, the authors define the psychological term in the first paragraph, “desensitization”, in simple and straightforward words as a process to make people numb to the pain and suffering of others. Then they state that the relationship between desensitization and helping behavior can be explored by integration of a pioneering work on helping by Latane and Darley in 1968 and their work on physiological desensitization to aggression. They provide two dendrograms (tree diagrams) to illustrate two summaries of the basic concepts and logic of helping behavior and desensitization to aggression. Based on the diagrams, the authors then indicate three of the five factors that were necessary for someone deciding to help a victim are relevant for this paper’s topic, and the possible effects that desensitization can exert on them. In the last paragraph of the introduction, the authors introduce the purpose of the article is to fill in two gaps in the previous desensitization literature. As there are no published studies testing the hypothesis that violent media stimuli known to produce physiological

desensitization also reduce helping behavior or field experiments testing the effect of violent-entertainment media on helping an injured person, the authors conducted a lab experiment (study 1) and a field study (study 2) to achieve their purpose.

The structure of this article is fairly clear. When discussing the two studies conducted, the authors analyze each of them in the following order of sections: "method" which is divided into the description of "participants" and "procedure", "results" and "discussion". In both studies, the authors describe the experimental processes in extreme details in the section of "method". Meanwhile, in the lab experiment, they demonstrate strict control over invariables, such as the equal time of playing video games and the equal distribution of male and female participants in violent and nonviolent games. Furthermore, in order to eliminate gender differences, two parallel versions of the fight involved male actors that was used for male participants or female actors that was used for female participants. While in the field study, although the subjects that were observed had to be random moviegoers, the authors attempted to reduce other factors that could influence the results by asking the confederate to drop her crutch 36 times, 9 times in each of the four experimental conditions: before or after the showing of a violent or nonviolent movie. When presenting the analyses of the results, the authors compare data obtained from the experiments and discuss some possible limitations. In the first study, they used four types of violent games and four types of nonviolent games in order to test whether different types of games produced different effects on any dependent variables; however, no significant differences were found. In the second study, the authors indicate that the time elapsed before subjects helped the young woman increased when the number of bystanders increased, and women helped less often than men, but these effects had no statistical significances. Moreover, they illustrate the data obtained from the second study with a bar chart, rendering the result fairly easy and straightforward to comprehend. In the section of

“discussion”, the authors concisely conclude the pattern discovered from each study and provide the obstacles to helping.

At last, there is a section named “general discussion” concludes that the similar results across very different studies suggest that desensitization caused by media violence generalizes beyond failure to help victims of violence as it can influence one’s judgement of severity of injury, and therefore, people exposed to media violence become “comfortably numb” to the pain and suffering of others and are consequently less helpful.

### **Comparison**

In comparison of the two academic articles from different fields but on similar topics, I hold the view that the psychological essay is better than the sociological one in terms of conveying experimental results despite the fact that they share some similarities.

The literature reviews both serve as the rationale and fundamental concepts lying down the two articles. Each of them is based on one previous literature on the similar topic. Moreover, both indicate the limitations of the previous work and design experiments with more controlled invariables.

In addition, both of them discuss about some variables that might influence the final results when analyzing the data collected from the experiments. Although the variables are found statistically insignificant, the discussion demonstrates the pursuit of preciseness from the authors of both articles.

However, compared to the sociological article, the psychological article is structured more clearly by making more subtitles, which renders the essay easier to follow. Furthermore, by giving an abstract, the authors of the psychological article inform the audience at the very beginning about the purpose, basic structure, summarized

processes of the two experiments, and the conclusion reached of this essay. Therefore, the audience are able to have general knowledge and certain expectations when reading this article. On the contrast, the sociological article that using long and integrated paragraphs to convey the ideas and lacking a short abstract makes the essay fairly hard to follow.

Moreover, when the authors of the psychological paper present the results, they utilize tree diagrams and bar charts rather than tables of data used by the authors of the sociological paper. Through transforming experimental data to straightforward graphs, the authors of the psychological paper succeed in presenting straightforward results so that even those who do not have knowledge in psychology can understand. In addition, the authors of the psychological paper illustrate their analysis by explaining it again in simpler language which the authors of the sociological paper fail to achieve. Therefore, the choice of language also contributes to making the psychological paper more approachable to the general public.

Due to its clearer structure, use of graphs, and choice of language, the psychological paper achieves to convey the opinions and present the conclusion to the general public in a better way.

## **Interview**

I decided to interview my 21-year-old cousin who is also a fan of movies like me. Back in home, he and I often went to the movie theater together to watch the latest science fiction movies. Therefore, ever since we were young children, we have been exposed to many fantasy aggressive scenes. Through the interview, I aim to find out what feelings that fictional violence can bring to the audience from a personal perspective, and if a movie fan has a negative attitude toward the violent scenes in movies.



There are several reasons I chose to interview him. First, the two academic articles I chose to study are both written by professionals. Thus, I want to see how a person with without expertise in either of the fields view the fantasy violence. Second, since both papers conclude that the fictional aggression in movies leads to aggressive behaviors of the audience at least immediately after seeing the movies, I attempt to explore if a person with pure passion for movies at least aware of the danger of fantasy violence, and therefore determine the extent of the two papers' significance. Third, as I share close kinship and friendship with my cousin, he would not conceal his true thoughts from me, and therefore, I can ask straightforward questions without worrying about the validity of my interviewee's responses.

Q: What do you feel when you watch the violent scenes in the middle of a movie and when you think of these scenes immediately after the movie?

A: I feel very excited or worried about the protagonist when I watch the violence going on during the movie. You know, when you watch a movie, you are concentrated and follow the protagonist to experience his or her life. But it can get different when I think back of the violence after the movie, well, depending on how violent the scenes are. So, sometimes I feel uncomfortable about the violent scenes after the movie. I guess it is because I am gradually calming down from the excitement that the movie brings to me.

Q: How long it approximately takes for you to get rid of the excitement that the violent scenes brings to you?

A: Well, it takes about 15 minutes, I guess. I usually get very excited right after the movie, but things will calm down eventually.

Q: Do you think seeing the violent scenes in the movie will lead to your insensitiveness or ignorance of aggressive behaviors in real life? Especially immediately after you watch those scenes?

A: Well, I don't think those scenes will influence me that much in real life. The violence is not real after all. I think I can tell the difference between reality and fiction. Even it is immediately after I watch violence scenes, I am pretty sure I will not ignore the real aggression in real life.

### Analysis

Although my cousin had basic understandings that the violent scenes in the movies were able to induce the audience's excitement and even sickness immediately after the movie, he did not have sufficient knowledge about the negative consequences of film violence in real life situations. It seemed that he was fairly confident that he, as a young adult, had capability to differentiate the fantasy aggression from violence in reality. Therefore, based on my cousin's responses, I conclude that my cousin was not vigilant enough against the danger of fictional aggression even though he agreed that exceeding film violence was not appropriate.

### Conclusion

This project is started by ~~two-three~~ research questions: Can film violence increase the possibilities of the audience to engage in aggressive behaviors in real life? If so, how does film violence exert this influence? How do different communities communicate the consequences of film violence to the general public?

For the first two research questions, ~~After an interview and analysis and comparison of two academic articles on this topic,~~ I reach the conclusion that film violence is able to increase the possibilities of the audience to engage in aggressive behaviors in real life immediately after the movie through desensitizing the audience, after an interview and analysis and comparison of two academic articles on this topic. The findings are very significant as the interview I conducted with my cousin reflects that many young people

do not realize the danger of film violence. For example, my cousin trusted his capability of distinguishing the fantasy aggression from reality, and therefore believed that he would not be psychologically influenced even if he admitted that the violent scenes would cause his excitement during and immediately after the movie. Thus, it was very essential and necessary to educate the general public, especially the youths, about the negative consequences that film violence can exert on the audience's psychological states immediately after the movie.

Since I have realized the importance of publicizing the danger of film violence, exploring the different ways that different communities discuss about this topic is also important, which is to answer the third research question. From my cousin's responses, one can easily see that the young people that my cousin stands for are not take fantasy aggression very seriously although they know the word, violence, is not good. Therefore, how to educate and convince them about the danger of fictional violence is crucial. Comparing two academic articles from sociology and psychology, I find that the sociological paper is written in obscure language as the authors use too many jargons and tables of data without fully explaining them in simply language. However, the psychological paper is different. Its authors not only elaborate every jargon they use in simply words, but also arrange the paper into an extremely clear structure with many subtitles and an abstract at the beginning that briefly informs the audience the experiments conducted in this paper. Moreover, they choose to use tree diagrams and bar charts to illustrate their findings rather than tables of data that the sociologists use in their paper. As a result, those data are no longer just a bunch of meaningless numbers in the eyes of the general public. They form a trend and provide evidence of the danger of film violence. Therefore, it is clear that the general public, especially the youths, who are mostly not experts of sociology or psychology are able and more willing to gain understandings of this topic through the psychological essay.