



## Research Report

## The effects of viewing violent movie via computer on aggressiveness among college students

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## ABSTRACT

Based on aggression theories and previous researches, we examined the effects of viewing violent movie via computer on aggressiveness among college students. A total of 108 (56% females) undergraduates participated in this study, with 54 distributed to violent movie group and 54 allocated to non-violent movie group. Results indicated that aggressiveness of violent movie group but not non-violent movie group is significantly strengthened. Moreover, aggressiveness of males but not females is significantly enhanced among violent movie group instead of non-violent movie group, and aggressiveness of viewers with high aggression (HA) but not low aggression (LA) is significantly enhanced among violent movie group instead of non-violent movie group. For males and viewers with HA, violent movie can significantly intensify aggressiveness, indicating that gender and aggressive level are responsible for aggressiveness among college students. The implications of these findings are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Human aggressiveness, in the past, was considered as any behavior attacking others with a deliberate goal to cause harm or irritation (Anderson & Bushman, 2002a, 2002b; Huesmann, 2007). In other words, aggressiveness was spontaneously motivated by irritation to absolutely injure the target. Prior researchers believed that aggression is proactive rather than responsive, and it is a deliberate means of obtaining targets (Akert, Aronson, & Wilson, 2010; Anderson & Bushman, 2002a, 2002b; Anderson, Carnagey, & Eubanks, 2003). Thus, aggressiveness, to a large extent, was a kind of evoked cognition, affect, or behavior, which was forceful, hostile, or attacking. Based on this, we assume that aggressiveness, from an implicit standpoint, highlights the mediating role of cognitive information processing on aggressive behavior.

What factors are prone to causing aggressiveness? A growing body of correlational, cross-sectional and longitudinal research drew controversial conclusions upon the relations between media

violence (e.g., film, TV, video games, radio, lyrics, internet, etc.) and aggressiveness over the past decades (Anderson & Bushman, 2002a, 2002b; Hancox, Milne, & Poulton, 2004; Huesmann, Moise, Podolski, & Eron, 2003; Johnson, Cohen, Smailes, Kasen, & Brook, 2002). A host of evidences overwhelmingly confirmed that short-term and long-term exposure to violent television during childhood and adulthood significantly increases aggressive behavior and cultivates aggressive personality (Anderson, 2004; Anderson & Carnagey, 2009; Anderson, Gentile, & Buckley, 2007; Anderson et al., 2010; Bushman, 1998; Bushman & Anderson, 2001, 2007; Bushman & Brickman, 2007; Bushman & Huesmann, 2006; Huesmann et al., 2003; Johnson et al., 2002; Wood, Wong, & Chachere, 1991). Further, studies revealed that early exposure to violent media may be an important predictor of anti-behavior and violent crimes in real-life situations (Anderson & Bushman, 2001, 2002a, 2002b; Jane, Brown, & Witherspoon, 2002; Paik & Comstock, 1994; Wood et al., 1991). Notably, it was found that reward and punishment in media violence causes aggressive cognition, thoughts, hostile expectation and aggressive behavior afterwards (Anderson, 1997; Carnagey & Anderson, 2005; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Zhen, Xie, Zhang, Wang, & Li, 2011).

Overall, these mainstream findings above indicated that viewing violent movie has a negative impact on an individual's aggressiveness. Other researchers, however, did not agree with these standpoints and held the opposite view. Viewing violent movie, they argued, might not be positively connected with aggressive

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thoughts, cognition and behavior, and that movie violence does not surely lead to aggression (Freedman, 1984, 2002; Funk, Bechtoldt, Pasold, & Baumgardner, 2004; Holden, 2005). For the sake of ameliorating the effects, it is of necessity to understand how viewing violent movie affects individuals' aggressiveness, and to identify those who are sensitive to aggressiveness. Only by doing so, could we put correct intervention and prevention strategies of aggressiveness into effect.

Currently, there are mainly three theories accounting for the forming process of aggressiveness, such as General Aggression Model (GAM), Cognitive Neo-association Model (CNM), and Social Learning Theory (SLT). GAM assumed that short-term exposure to violent media (situational variable) could activate viewer's aggressive cognition, thinking, arousal, affect and behavior, and that long-term exposure could develop viewer's aggressive traits (DeWall, Anderson, & Bushman, 2011). CNM clarified that aversive events amplifies aggressive tendency. Particularly, negative influences produced by disagreeable occurrences routinely encourage various thoughts, expressive motor reactions, memories and physiological reactions linked with both fight and flight tendency (Berkowitz, 1993). SLT proposed that people obtain aggressive reactions similar to the mode of attaining other intricate types of social behavior by immediate experience or by simulating others (Bandura, 1973).

With the Information Technology (IT) revolution taking place, violent media online is becoming one of the most popular entertainments among adolescents (Cesarone, 1998; Gentile, Lynch, Linder, & Walsh, 2004; Gentile & Walsh, 2002; Gross, 2004, 2010; Kirsh, 2003; Unsworth, Devilly, & Ward, 2007; Wu, Wang, & Tsai, 2010). In the process of exposing violent media, adolescents may imitate aggressive behavior in real-life settings not only through observational learning (Bandura, 1973; Huesmann, 2010), but also through stimulating enjoyment. Unconsciously or consciously, college students may spend their spare time watching violent movie via computer, and it is highly possible that they internalize movie violence into aggressive cognition and behavior. Little empirical research, nevertheless, has systematically explored the causal correlation between movie violence and aggressiveness among Chinese college students. In general, educators often raise such questions like "Does viewing violent movie possibly cause college students to attack others or commit crimes?" Although it is quite hard for us to respond directly and clearly since no empirical support from previous researches, it can be gradually addressed by Chinese psychologists through cross-sectional or longitudinal research.

Taken together, in this study, we examine whether viewing violent movie via computer strengthens aggressiveness among college students by employing a modified STROOP task. Besides, we investigate whether aggressiveness varies across different genders and aggressive levels.

## 2. Research framework

### 2.1. Correlation exists between violent movie and aggressiveness

Bushman (1995) found that college students who watched violent media reported higher levels of aggressive affect than participants who viewed the non-violent media, indicating a significant positive correlation between amounts of time participants reported watching violent TV programs and intensity of noise blasts given to opponent (aggressive behavior). Several longitudinal studies even concluded that a single exposure to firearm violence doubles the chance that a young person will later engage in violent behavior (Bingenheimer, Brennan, & Earls, 2005; Kleck, 2005; Mehta, 2005). Drawing upon these, individuals who view violent movie in the laboratory may increase likelihood of aggressiveness immediately. Hence, we propose the *Hypothesis 1*,

**H1.** Viewing violent movie via computer may significantly enhance aggressiveness among college students.

### 2.2. Correlation exists between violent movie, aggressiveness and gender

Researches demonstrated that boys are more susceptible to social and physical aggression relative to girls (Paquette & Underwood, 1999; Smith & Waterman, 2005). In the real life, boys are more likely to view violent movie than girls, and boys are prone to resorting violence when solving problems relative to girls. Thus, *Hypothesis 2* is stated as follows,

**H2.** Males but not females may show significant aggressiveness by viewing violent movie instead of non-violent movie.

### 2.3. Correlation exists between violent movie, aggressiveness and aggressive level

Previous studies showed that subjects with high trait-aggressiveness are more prone to be aggressive than those with low trait-aggressiveness by watching violent movies (Bushman, 1995; Marshall & Brown, 2006). We may infer that viewers with HA may be more likely to activate their aggressive cognition than those with LA when they expose violent movie and aggressive stimuli. Based on past findings and research rationale, we put forward *Hypothesis 3*,

**H3.** Viewers with HA but not LA may show significant aggressiveness by viewing violent movie instead of non-violent movie.

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Participants

In the summer semester of 2012, a total of 108 undergraduate students (56% females) from four grade levels participated in this study. They ranged in age from 19 to 23 ( $M = 20.60$ ,  $SD = 1.82$ ). Participants were recruited from the urban districts of Chongqing in southwestern China. Therefore, the sample could just be seen as representative of undergraduate students in urban China. The majority of participants were freshmen (79.2%). 54 participants viewing NINJA ASSASSIN (2009) were regarded as violent movie group, and 54 participants watching BIG NOTHING (2006) were considered as non-violent movie group.

### 3.2. Materials and stimuli

#### 3.2.1. Computer & Earphone

Display resolution was  $1024 \times 576$  pixels, and refresh rate was 60 Hz. The distance between participants' faces and the computer monitor was approximately 60 cm. The faces of the participants were parallel with the computer screen, and the eyes were kept at the same level with the screen center.

#### 3.2.2. Movies

NINJA ASSASSIN, a type of American violent movie directed by James McTeigue, was produced by Joel Silver and Wachowski brothers. NINJA ASSASSIN explored political corruption, child endangerment and the impact of violence. The time of watching this movie lasted for 15 min. This kind of movie was selected as violent movie as it consisted of many body-fighting scenes and language attacks, which was consistent with the definition of violent media (Anderson & Bushman, 2001). BIG NOTHING, a kind of

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