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Short Communication

Sensation-seeking and video choice in second grade children

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ABSTRACT

One hundred and twenty-three second grade students were asked to choose a video about “scary sharks” or “bunnies.” Two versions of each video were shown, one high in excitement and one low in excitement. Children high in sensation-seeking and boys were more likely to choose the scary video, while those low in sensation-seeking and girls most often chose to see the bunny video. When content was manipulated for high and low excitement, those choosing the scary video liked the exciting versions and somewhat disliked the less exciting versions, while those who had chosen the bunny video liked the less exciting version and disliked the exciting versions. These findings extend to young children previous research showing that sensation-seeking operates in media selection.

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1. Introduction

Zuckerman (1979) defined sensation-seeking as a person's need for varied, novel, and exciting experiences and the willingness to take risks for the sake of having those experiences. A body of literature exists that shows that among adolescents and young adults, sensation-seeking predicts a tendency to seek out and enjoy highly stimulating movie genres, including horror (Harris et al., 2000; Johnston, 1995), pornography (Zuckerman & Litle, 1986) and violent action adventure movies (Aluja-Fabregat, 2000; Aluja-Fabregat & Torrubia, 1993). Although in these studies being male was associated with high levels of sensation seeking, being male also made an independent contribution to selecting these stimulating genres. To date, no demonstration of similar relationships in young children exists.

The literature on elementary school-aged children on sensation-seeking has focused on showing a relationship among high sensation-seeking and physical risk taking and accidents (Morrongiello & Matheis, 2004, 2007; Morrongiello & Sedore, 2005; Potts, Martinez, & Dedmon, 1995); high sensation seeking and excessive use of videogames, where the results have been mixed (Chiu, Lee, & Huang, 2004); and early sensation seeking as a risk factor for later substance use (Hampson, Andrews, & Barclay, 2008). Showing that young children high in sensation-seeking choose highly stimulating videos has both practical and theoretical interest. Practically, it has been shown that in early adolescence,

those high in sensation-seeking choose age-inappropriate movies where, among other things, they are exposed to positive images of alcohol use (Dalton et al., 2003), sexuality, and smoking (Sargent, Wills, Stoolmiller, Gibson, & Gibbons, 2006). Young adolescents high in sensation-seeking may also be vulnerable to serious emotional sequelae by watching frightening and violent films (Hoekstra, Harris, & Helmick, 1999). If young children high in sensation seeking can likewise be shown to be at risk for watching movies described as “exciting” or “scary,” they, too, may be exposed to collateral inappropriate content. It would also be of theoretical interest to see when this tendency to select very stimulating media can be seen in young children, as children's choice of media during early elementary school tends to be characterized by repetitive watching of familiar material (Lee, Bartolic, & Vandewater, 2009; Wright et al., 2001).

1.1. Hypothesis

As sensation-seeking is viewed as both a willingness to seek out stimulation and an enjoyment of that stimulation, we hypothesized that children who were high in sensation-seeking would be more likely to choose a potentially exciting video (“scary sharks” versus “cute bunnies”), and when two versions of each video were shown, the one with substantially more exciting content would be enjoyed more by high sensation seekers than the version with less exciting content. Likewise, we hypothesized that those low in sensation-seeking would be more likely to choose the less potentially exciting video and rate the less exciting versions higher than the more exciting ones.

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2. Method

2.1. Participants

One hundred and twenty-three second grade students from six classrooms in two schools participated in the study. There were 63 girls and 60 boys in the sample. Their ages ranged from 6 years 9 months to 7 years 8 months, with a median age of 7 years 2 months. The two schools participating in the study were located in a small ($N = 60,000$), culturally diverse city. The participants reflected the diversity of their schools, with 60 students being Caucasian, 34 African-American, 8 Asian-American, and 21 Hispanic.

2.2. Procedures

The week before viewing the video, the sensation-seeking measure (see below) was administered to students individually by graduate students who were unaware of the nature of the study. During the following week, children were prompted at the end of each day by their teachers that they would choose between two videos on Friday which were described as about “scary sharks” or “cute little bunnies.” On Friday morning, each child wrote down his or her choice and children viewed the videos in the afternoon.

Two options for each video choice were available, one which was designed to be exciting and the other as not exciting. All videos were live action nature films that were edited to 22 min in length. Both of the exciting videos contained lengthy scenes of predation, while the not exciting videos did not. The exciting videos had agitating musical scores, while the not exciting videos had no musical score. The exciting shark video was about Great White sharks, while the not exciting video was about smaller sharks. The exciting “bunny” video was about life in the wild, while the not exciting video emphasized keeping rabbits as pets. Previously, the videos were rated as scary or not by a group of 42 3rd grade students: 88% and 86% rated the exciting shark and bunny videos as scary, while 36% and 21% rated the not exciting shark and bunny videos as scary. Teachers reported that in each of the eight showings of exciting videos, children closed their eyes, held each others hands, hid their eyes on the desk, gasped, and got out of their desks, while in the unexciting videos, the reactions were mostly laughter. All videos were on recommended lists for elementary school science viewing. Students saw a video with their choice of animal species but were randomly assigned to the exciting or non-exciting conditions.

After watching the video, each child rated how much they liked the movie on a 7-point high-positive Likert item. In addition to numbers, “happy faces” were used to indicate that 5–7 were increasingly positive choices, while “grumpy faces” were used to indicate that 3–1 were increasingly negative choices. This same method had been used during the week to rate stories to help students understand the rating system.

2.3. Sensation-seeking measures

A number of measures of sensation-seeking in children have been developed (Kafry, 1982; Morrongiello & Lasenby-Lessard, 2006; Russo et al., 1991; Russo et al., 1993). In pilot testing, it was discovered that many of the second grade children could neither read aloud many of the items accurately, nor reliably chose a response in the forced-choice format. Moreover, a fourth of the children in the sample were less than 7-years old, the lower limit of the existing scales. Thus it was decided to develop a reasonably short scale that could be administered orally to children. Two items were adapted from the four factors of sensation-seeking

(Thrill and Adventure Seeking; Experience Seeking; Disinhibition; and Boredom Susceptibility; see Appendix).

Each of the eight items was scored as either 0 or 1. The total number of points was the number of high sensation-seeking options endorsed. The mean score for boys was 4.24 ($SD = 1.85$) and the mean score for girls was 3.42 ($SD = 1.69$) (see Table 1).

2.3.1. Reliability

Students in two classrooms ($N = 42$) were re-administered the scale a week after the film choice task. The test–retest reliability was found to be .82. For the entire group, using first administrations of the test, the internal consistency was Alpha = .68. Given the brevity of the scale, these levels of reliability are acceptable.

2.3.2. Validity

Teachers were asked to rate each child on four items, based on Zuckerman’s description of the four factors of sensation seeking on a 6-point Likert scale from 1 = “much less than other children” to 6 = “much more than other children.” These items were: seeks out thrills and adventurous behavior; Seeks out new experiences; is easily bored; Can easily act in a way that is not the norm. The parent giving permission also provided similar ratings. Correlations were computed for girls and boys separately. For teacher ratings, the correlations with scores on the children sensation-seeking scale were .56 ($p < .001$) for boys and .62 ($p < .001$) for girls. For parent ratings, the correlations were .50 ($p < .001$) for boys and .48 ($p < .001$) for girls. Correlations between teacher and parent ratings were .44 ($p < .001$) for boys and .52 ($p < .001$) for girls.

3. Results

To test the first hypothesis, that sensation-seeking and sex would both make a contribution to the prediction of choosing the shark video, a regression analysis was conducted. Table 2 reports the results of that analysis which shows that both predictors significantly predicted video choice. Being a boy and being high in sensation seeking both significantly predicted choosing the shark video.

The enjoyment ratings of the films were submitted to a 2 (shark versus rabbit video choice) \times 2 (high versus low excitement) GLM analysis, controlling for sex and sensation seeking as covariants. While neither video choice, $F(1, 117) = 0.43$, $p = .51$, nor excitement, $F(1, 117) = 0.06$, $p = .81$, produced a significant main effect, there was a significant interaction between these variables, $F(1, 117) = 15.52$, $p < .001$. As expected, among those who chose the scary video, those who saw the exciting version rated it higher ($M = 4.47$; $SD = 1.55$) than the ratings of those who saw the not exciting version ($M = 3.80$; $SD = 1.45$), while among those who chose the bunny video, those who saw the not exciting version

Table 1

Distribution of boys’ and girls’ sensation-seeking scores and their choice of “scary” shark video.

SS score	Boys N	Girls N	N boys Choosing shark	N girls Choosing shark
0	0	2	0	0
1	5	9	2	1
2	6	12	4	1
3	15	15	8	2
4	12	9	10	3
5	3	7	2	5
6	6	2	5	2
7	6	5	6	4
8	7	2	7	2
Total	60	63		

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