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The Effects of Television News on Violence, Risk-taking, and Deviant Behavior

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Abstract

This longitudinal study on adolescents' television news viewing habits and subsequent risk-taking behaviors will be conducted with the participation of 100 12-year old students (50 male, 50 female) from Central Middle School and Central High School of Philadelphia and Clarion Area High School. Students will be asked to participate in the study for a period of 6 years and will be asked to keep dated logs of their television news watching hours and risk-taking behaviors. Researchers will visit the participants' schools once every 3 months and have them fill out questionnaires regarding the information they kept in their logbooks. A positive correlation between television news watching and risk-taking behaviors in adolescents is expected to be found.

The Effects of Television News on Violence, Risk-taking, and Deviant Behavior

Adolescents are frequently studied with regard to how the media influences them, with special attention paid to how violent material is interpreted. Due to an increasingly violent climate, researchers are most interested in how mass media violence affects their tendency toward aggressive behavior. Most research in this area focuses on how television, movies, music, and video games affect children and adolescents, but relatively little research has been done on the link between violence and video games, music, television shows and television news. We did not find much research in this area and feel that more needs to be conducted in order to better understand the connection between violent behavior and these forms of media. For our research, however, we propose that more research be conducted specifically on the influence that television news has on adolescents' behavior. Violent imagery has been linked to an increase in violent behavior, but not a lot of research has been conducted on the realistic violence that is portrayed on television newscasts. This literature review will better acquaint the reader with the roles that music, video games, and television programs play in influencing adolescents' behaviors. It will also provide some background knowledge of research related to television news' affect on adolescents and explain why we chose this specific topic to study.

Music is a form of media that has a great impact on our lives; however, we rarely stop to think about how music affects our attitudes. Much of the existing research on the topic of music and its effects on behavior are focused primarily upon how music negatively influences teenagers and adults. The public seems very interested in finding a cause for the violence raging in our inner cities, but it seems as though little attention has been paid to the affect of violent music on the adolescent populations. The positive correlation between college students that has been well documented suggests that violent music would illicit aggressive behavior from

children and adolescents as well. Anderson, Carnagey, and Eubanks (2003) conducted an experiment involving a sample of 59 college students, their results revealed that listening to songs with “violent” lyrics produced more hostility in the students’ responses than did the contemporary songs, which were “non-violent”.

The ever-growing popularity of the rap music genre inspired another study of the effects of music on behavior, this one being directed toward the adolescent population. The Brown University Child and Adolescent Behavior Letter reported a study that focused on the negative behavioral effects associated with listening to this type of music. This study concluded that the participants (girls between ages 14 and 18) with greater exposure to rap videos were three times more likely to have had an altercation with a teacher, three times more likely to have been arrested, and one and a half times more likely to have contracted a sexually transmitted disease (Brown, 2003). Again, this study illustrates a link between music and violent behavior.

While most of the research dealing with music focuses primarily on its negative effects on behavior, this does not demonstrate a causal relationship in any way. It may be because young people seek out these types of music, because children are simply modeling those around them, a combination of the two, or neither. Much of the research has only begun to scratch the surface of this issue and further research could bring us to a better understanding of how music can affect adolescents.

Studies have also shown a positive correlation between video games and violent behavior during childhood and adolescence. This may be due to the fact that video games are becoming more lifelike. Researchers are finding that children are spending more time playing videogames than watching television (Wagner, 2004). This may be a problem because in video games, the gamer is participatory, not passive as in sitting in front of the TV and watching something

realistic, like the news. Studies have shown that people who play violent video games are more prone to behave violently. In a Japanese study of fifth and sixth graders, a positive correlation was found between the amount of time spent playing video games and later physical aggression (Herzfeld, 2004).

Children between the ages of 8 and 18 spend more than 40 hours per week using some type of media, such as computers, video game systems, and television. This is not including school or homework assignments (Anderson & Bushman, 2001). Seventy-three percent of fourth grade boys and 59% of fourth grade girls report that their favorite games are violent (Anderson & Bushman, 2001). According to the National Institute on Media and Family (NIMF) Eighty-seven percent of all students and 96% of the boys said they play video games regularly (Herzfeld, 2004).

Another problem people may be overlooking is parental oversight. Teens in grades eight through 12 reported that 90% of their parents do not check the ratings on the video games that their children play (Anderson & Bushman, 2001). However, it is very important that parents pay close attention to these ratings due to the fact that the most heavily marketed and consumed games are those with violence (Herzfeld, 2004). It is also not just the parent's fault since many vendors do not enforce the ratings system (Herzfeld, 2004). This is a problem because the video games can get into children's hands that are too young to be able to draw the line between game and reality.

All of the above information illustrates the positive correlation between violent video games and increased violence. A good example of how the distortion of reality due to video games is the tragedy that occurred at Columbine High School. Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were avid fans of a violent game called Doom. They liked it so much that Eric made a special

version of Doom. It included two shooters, extra weapons, unlimited ammunition and victims who could not fight back (Anderson & Bushman, 2001). These features are very similar to aspects of the actual shootings. Although this may be an extreme example it is a perfect illustration of how violent video games can distort a child's perception of right and wrong.

Many studies have been conducted with the goal of predicting children's aggressive behavior due to watching aggressive and violent television shows. The audience of these shows usually includes children and adolescents. In an average hour of children's television, 20 to 25 acts of violence are depicted. According to recent research, there is a strong relationship between viewing violent television and aggressive behavior (Johnson et al. 2002).

A study conducted on children's behavior after watching "The Mighty Morphin Power Rangers" showed that children committed more aggressive acts against peers than did the control group who watched a program without any violence. A gender difference was also reported; a significant amount of boys compared to girls were more likely to perform aggressive acts (Boyatzis et al. 1995). This is also evident in other studies conducted; boys were more influenced than girls by the violence in television shows. Most of the studies conducted, however, have been short term and have not looked at aggression over children's life spans into adolescence and adulthood. There was one such study done, however, that analyzed television violence viewing at ages 6 to 10 and then compared it to adult aggressive behavior 15 years later. This longitudinal study concluded that there was a strong association between viewing violent television at a younger age and the likelihood of aggressive behavior occurring into adulthood. Results showed that behavior considered to be violent was more prevalent in males than it was in the females of the study (Rowell, 2003).

Although television in general has received a reasonable amount of attention there is evidence that the effects of television news on youth has received minimal consideration. Most studies conducted on media violence and their effects on children include areas discussed previously such as television shows, music, and video games. One of the main reasons that this area may be overlooked is because adults often do not realize the amount of news that children actually pay attention to.

It has been found that children rely heavily on television, not only for entertainment, but also for knowledge of events. Whether it is their choice to watch it or they see their parents watching it. Another point is that one quarter of children in the United States has a television set in their own bedroom. Also, no matter what they choose to watch, they are unable to control it when programming is interrupted with 'breaking news' stories that often flash scenes of violence in front of them. This is becoming more and more common on television today (Walma van der Molen, 2004).

One example of these interruptions would be with school shootings; there is a possibility that viewing so much violent news on television can encourage an imitative or "copycat" behavior (Anderson *et al.*, 2003b). As stated before, video games were blamed for the Columbine shootings, but many people didn't consider how much this event was publicized and how that may have impacted the increase in youth violence afterwards. One study however, did find that there was an increase in the number of violent crimes after several murder cases were reported in the early to mid- 60s, including the assassination of President Kennedy. Another study concluded that stories of a well-known person's suicide could increase the likelihood that other people will take their own lives as well (Anderson *et al.*, 2003b).

Another important aspect of television news that may have the greatest effect on children and adolescents is the regular depiction of real-life violence on the news (Walma van der Molen, 2004). Many children can recognize that the violence in cartoons or video games that they see is fictional, but when they see the news, they realize that these are actual events that have in fact happened.

Some of the effects that have been found in this subject area are that short-term aggressive behavior, which is often fostered by imitation of violence, could be encouraged by violent news. It was also found that programs that overemphasize crime and terror could enhance long-term learning of violent schemas and could lead people to believe that the world is a violent place. Therefore, children may learn that violence is important in this world and is needed to protect them and to resolve conflict; they become less sensitive to other people's distress and more accepting of violent behavior (Walma van der Molen, 2004).

Although media violence can have some negative affect on any type of person, studies have shown that individuals who are already characteristically aggressive will react more negatively to violent media. This is due to the fact that they already have several risk factors that may predispose them toward aggressive behavior. Children who are at the greatest risk to grow up as aggressive, are those who were both characteristically aggressive and watched higher levels of television violence. It has also been found though that television violence does have an affect on later aggression in children who initially had low levels (Anderson et al., 2003b).

Current studies show that in fact, there is a relationship between these factors, but more needs to be done in order to create a more solid knowledge base in this area. Most of the research in this area focuses on the positive correlation between the violent material on television news and the violent impact that it has on behavior. Adolescents appear to have an increased

tendency to act in aggressive and violent ways based upon the empirical evidence found in studies. We are choosing to focus on television news' impact specifically because we feel that more research needs to be conducted on the impact of real life violence as it is delivered in a very pervasive form that is easily accessible and frequently watched.

Method

Participants

One hundred 12-year old adolescent students, 50 male and 50 female (25 students of each gender from two different schools), will be asked to participate in this study on the behavioral effects of watching television news. The students will be from various cultural backgrounds, economic statuses, and of different races. Participants will be recruited from Central High School of Philadelphia and Clarion Area High School at random after contacting and receiving permission from their respective school districts and parents or legal guardians. Students from both rural and urban schools will take part in this longitudinal study, which will span six years. Throughout their participation in the study, all attempts will be made to treat the students ethically and respectfully. Participants' names will be kept anonymous and they will be informed of their roles in the study before beginning. Each participant, as well as their parent or legal guardian, will be asked to sign consent forms after the explanation of their rights and prior to the start of the study. Participants will also be informed of their right to leave the study at any point.

Materials

The following materials will be used in this study: a printed questionnaire to measure participants' television news viewing habits and risk-taking behaviors (Appendix A), a

parent/child consent form (Appendix B), a debriefing form (Appendix C), and a notebook will be provided for students to keep a log throughout the experiment. The questionnaire will consist of two sections that will consist of a total of 12 multiple-choice questions. The first section will ask the participant about his or her television news watching behavior and the second section will ask questions pertaining to the student's risk-taking behaviors. The parent/child consent form will be distributed to the parents or legal guardians before the start of the study. In order for the participant to take part in the study, the child's legal guardian must sign the consent form. The notebook given to the participants will be used as a log where they will keep track of their television news viewing as well as their risk-taking behavior. Their log will be used to keep a record of the number of hours they watch television news as well as a journal of their risk-taking behaviors. Participants will be given directions as to how to fill out the log prior to the start of the study. They will be asked to write down the approximate amount of television news watched on a daily basis. They will also be asked to indicate in the log any risk-taking behaviors, which will be explained to them in detail before the start of the study. This information will also be written in the first page of their logbook so that they can refer back to it at any time if they have questions. The notebook will be dated so to keep the participants' information organized and the students will be asked to record information at the start of each month.

Design and Procedure

In this study, we predict a positive correlation between adolescents' risk-taking behavior and their television news viewing time. Deviant, violent, and risk-taking behaviors will be defined as underage tobacco uses and drinking, use of drugs, fighting, theft, vandalism, and trouble at school.

We are measuring the effect of television news viewing and how it affects the type and amount of time the participants take part in violent, deviant, and/or risk-taking behaviors. We will conduct a longitudinal study over the span of six years, which will investigate the correlation between adolescents' exposure to television news and risk taking behaviors. The sample of 50 males and 50 females will be asked to fill out questionnaires at the starting age of 12 and then once every three months until they are 18-years old. In the questionnaire, they will be asked to answer questions about the amount of television news they have been watching in the past three months and any risk-taking behaviors during that time (i.e. bullying, underage drinking, vandalism, theft, etc.). Participants will use the information that they kept in their logs to input this information since it is difficult to remember such behavior over a period of 3 months. Teachers will also be asked to indicate risk-taking behavior among their students as a way of ensuring that students are indicating honest answers to the questions on the questionnaire. The students will be placed in a classroom setting (away from other students who are uninvolved in the study) and will be given 15 minutes to complete the self-report questionnaire. Students will also be asked by the researchers to keep a log during the times between surveys so that they have a record of information to provide on the questionnaire. As incentive to take part in the study, the participants will be awarded a pizza party and a gift certificate every 3 months (each time the fill out a questionnaire).

Discussion

Although our study may yield some interesting results, there may be some confounding factors that affect our findings. Dishonesty on the part of our participants, the possibility of participants either dropping out of the study or no longer being able to participate, and the fact

that our questionnaire has not been used before and may produce invalid results are three of the most prominent factors that may have the ability to confound our research. Because of the possibility of these factors affecting our research, there are some actions that could be taken if we decide to replicate the study or if other researchers who are interested in the positive correlation between adolescents' television news-watching habits and risk-taking behavior decide to recreate the study.

Dishonesty among the students who take part in our study is a major possibility. Since the questionnaire is set up in a self-report format, there is no way to guard against participants recording false information. Students may embellish their reports by making themselves seem as if they are performing more risk-taking behaviors on a regular basis, or they could indicate less risk-taking behavior on the questionnaire than they are actually doing in reality. Either way, this factor has the ability to seriously confound our research. Students may also forget to write in their logs. By doing this, they are likely to indicate inaccurate information on the questionnaire.

Another major factor affecting the outcome of our research is the possibility of participants dropping out of or no longer being able to take part in our study. The study is conducted over a 6-year span so the possibility of something happening to the students during that time to make them no longer able to participate is very high. A participant may move away, become ill, or simply no longer want to be involved in the research. We have a large enough sample size that the loss of a few participants may not seriously affect our data, but because the research takes such a long time to complete, it is highly possible that more than a few would drop out, which would have a more serious affect on our study.

Another possible confounding factor is that our questionnaire may not yield reliable results because the questions may be too vague. Since our questionnaire has not been used in the

past for research and has not been used on a smaller group of participants for pilot research, there is a higher possibility that there may be factors that exist within the questionnaire that could affect the results of our research study. For instance, although the questionnaire has been thoroughly reviewed, there may be either loaded or leading questions (questions that are created with the intent to elicit a specific response from the participant) that would elicit unfair responses from our participants.

If we, or another set of researchers, were to recreate this study, it would be important to take into consideration the previously defined factors. To gain more accurate information regarding participants' risk-taking and television news watching behaviors, the best way to go about it would be to actually observe the participants doing so. However, to observe a person in such a manner for 6 years would not only be costly, but would be extremely time consuming. It may be difficult to guard against participants dropping out of a study, but to combat this possible confounding factor, increasing the number of participants may help. Lastly, if we were to do this research again, we would definitely make sure that our questionnaire was more reliable and valid. Pilot research would be conducted before embarking on a costly, long-term study and the questionnaire would be tested and retested until it has reached its most reliable form. It may be beneficial to future researchers conducting this study to use an already established questionnaire that has been known to produce reliable results. Of course, other confounding factors may crop up during the course of research, but if this study were to be recreated, these suggestions will most likely help to create more reliable and valid results.

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Appendix A

Parental Consent Form

Participant's Last Name: _____ First Name: _____

Age: _____

Address _____

Address _____ City _____ State _____

ZIP _____

Parent/Guardian Last Name: _____ First Name: _____

Purpose of this longitudinal study:

To find a causal relationship between watching violent media and their involvement in risk taking behaviors, i.e. fighting, drinking, smoking, verbal abuse etc. This study will focus on news media. The participants will be asked to keep a log of what they have watched, and what emotions are involved, and if they participated in any risk taking behaviors. Every three months they will be evaluated by a short questionnaire, and they will receive pizza and refreshments along with a gift certificate. This will continue until the children reach the age of 18. Under no circumstances will your children's personal information be revealed to anyone, except the researchers in charge of the study.

Risks of Participating in this Survey:

There are no known risks of participating in this study

Participants Rights:

At any time during the study a parent or the subject can withdraw form the study without penalty. The students are under no obligation to answer any questions that they feel are too personal. In the case of publication of the study no personal information will be revealed.

By signing this form you and your child agree to participation in the study, and you also acknowledge that you and you child understand what this study entails.

Name of Participant _____

Signature of Parent/Guardian _____

Appendix B

Student Self-Report Questionnaire

We are conducting a study of adolescents aged 12 to 18 on their behaviors in response to television news coverage. We hope that you will volunteer and complete this questionnaire. Your name will be kept anonymous and the information provided will not be disclosed to anybody.

Fill in the questions that apply to you.

Name: _____

1. Your Gender: a) male b) female

2. Your age: _____

3. Your grade level: _____

4. Ethnic Status: a) White b) Black d) Hispanic c) Asian/Pacific Islander
d) American Indian/Alaskan Native f) Other _____

We would like to ask you about your television habits.

Directions: Please circle the one that best fits you.

1. On a daily basis, approximately how much television news have you watched in the past 3 months?

- A) 0 hours
- B) ½ hour
- C) 1 hour
- D) 2 hours
- E) More than 3 hours

2. Of the television news that you watched, about how much of that television news would you consider to be violent?

- A) None
 - B) A little
 - C) Some
 - D) A lot
 - E) All
-

We would like to ask you about your behavior

(Please remember that you will NOT get into trouble for any information that you put on this paper. Your name is kept anonymous and everything is confidential.)

Directions: Please circle the answer that best describes you.

In the past 3 months, how many times have you...

1. consumed an alcoholic beverage?	0 times	1-2 times	3-4 times	5-6 times	6 or more
2. damaged public property?	0 times	1-2 times	3-4 times	5-6 times	6 or more
3. stolen?	0 times	1-2 times	3-4 times	5-6 times	6 or more
4. gotten into a physical fight?	0 times	1-2 times	3-4 times	5-6 times	6 or more
5. gotten into a verbal fight?	0 times	1-2 times	3-4 times	5-6 times	6 or more
6. gotten detention for any reason?	0 times	1-2 times	3-4 times	5-6 times	6 or more
7. used drugs?	0 times	1-2 times	3-4 times	5-6 times	6 or more
8. smoked cigarettes?	0 times	1-2 times	3-4 times	5-6 times	6 or more
9. gotten into an argument with a teacher?	0 times	1-2 times	3-4 times	5-6 times	6 or more
10. been suspended?	0 times	1-2 times	3-4 times	5-6 times	6 or more

Appendix C

Debriefing Statement

The study you just concluded will help us to understand more about how news media may affect adolescents in risk taking behavior, violent acts, and deviant behavior. With the data you have helped us collect we can now find out if a positive correlation exists between watching news media and the above behaviors.

The data that was collected on the questionnaires was kept strictly confidential. We did this by not releasing any of the information to the public. Only confederates are able to obtain the participants records. The logbooks that were kept are also confidential. The only information that will be published will be empirical, thus keeping the participants anonymous. If you have questions or concerns please feel free to ask anyone of the confederates. We hope that this study was just as pleasant for you as it was for us. We thank you for your cooperation.