VIOLENT VIDEO GAMES: VIRTUAL VICE OR ASPIRING FORTITUDE?

H.D. KOMAL BOODHUN[1] AND MISS QURAISHA JOOMRATTY[2]

ABSTRACT

Violent video games gained much attention when school shootings and bank robberies occurred whereby offenders revealed that they were avid players of violent video games. However linking violent video games to aggression is too simplistic. Therefore the aim of this study was to find out the relationship between violent video games and aggression. Focus group discussions were used to collect data from 50 adolescents aged 10 to 14. The subjects were selected according to their exposure to video games. The results of this paper do not support the belief that violent video games lead to aggression. Instead, violent video games encouraged the participants to communicate better with others, motivated their participation in sports and at school. Conversely, most parents had limited knowledge about their wards' time spent playing video games. The majority of parents allowed their children to play violent video games, provided they had completed their homework.

Key Words: video games, violence, parental supervision, friendship, communication]

INTRODUCTION

Violent video games' effects have been a debatable subject for years. Youth crime is becoming a serious issue and this is echoed in school shootings and other violent crimes. In most of the cases, media violence is blamed, especially violent video games. Violent video games are further delineated as games in which the player has a chance to inflict agony and perpetrate imaginary physical attack on another character (Annetta and Bronack, 2011, p 44).

In 2013 Aaron Alexis, an obsessive player of Call of Duty, a violent video game, killed 13 people (Allen, 2013). In the United Kingdom in 2013, a 15 years old teenager robbed a bank in Liverpool with a fake gun pretending as if he was in the video game, Grand Theft Auto (Rush 2013). In Mauritius, several cases of violence against teachers and peers have been reported for the past few months. In Australia, 3 women who survived sexual violence began a petition against the sale of Grand Auto Theft. The petition stated that "it's a game that encourages players to murder women for entertainment. The incentive is to commit sexual violence against women, then abuse or kill them to proceed or get 'health' points" (Kent, 2014).

Studies on violent video games and aggression have produced mixed results. Many such studies were conducted on late adolescents, not on the younger ones. Hence it is imperative to conduct a research on young adolescents because it is during that particular age that they are more predisposed to be influenced by violent video games. The aim of this paper is therefore to investigate the relationship between violent video games and aggression during early adolescence. The United Nations Children's Funds (UNICEF) classifies young adolescents between the ages of 10 to 14 years. To achieve its aim, the paper adopts three objectives. As the first objective, the paper assesses the relevant theories concerning the influence of violent video games. Secondly it analyses their possible effects that may befall on young adolescents. Lastly this paper will attempt to unveil explanations on whether parental supervision and practices are essential or not.

[1] H.D.KOMAL BOODHUN, University of Mauritius, Department of Law Mauritius h.boodhun@uom.ac.mu Quraisha Joomratty Mauritius quraisha@joomratty.com
[2] Quraisha Joomratty, University of Mauritius, Mauritius, quraisha.joomratty@umail.uom.ac.mu

ADOLESCENCE

Research has proved that adolescence is the most vulnerable phase and is unequivocally marked by mostly biological and psychological changes (Smetana, Campione-Barr and Metzger, 2006). As a result of these changes adolescents are more prone to become aggressive especially after being exposed to violent media mostly video games (Kirsh, 2003). Even though studies found that violent video games usage decreases by late adolescence, yet the peak time remains at eleven to fifteen years old (Steinberg and Morris, 2001). However the development pace of every adolescent varies individually. Therefore taking into consideration the violent content of video games, the next sub-chapter shall analyse its relationship to aggression through different theories.

EXPLAINING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN VIOLENT VIDEO GAMES AND AGGRESSION

The General Aggression Model (GAM)

Developed by Anderson and Bushman, the Single General Aggression Model (GAM) shown in figure 1 below, generally explains how knowledge acquired is reflected in the behaviour of an individual which can be applied to violent video games as well. More specifically GAM describes a recurring relationship between an individual and his environment- that is, how people learn, how they perceive action of others and how they respond to it (Anderson et al., 2004). Violent video game here is a situation variable. Therefore the person with his individual personality such as moodiness, hostility or anger coupled with situation variable that is violent video games; together influence that individual's internal state. Being exposed to violent video games can increase the level of aggressiveness in both long and short term. As a result the individual believes that violence is the correct solution for every problem (Anderson et al., 2010).

Figure 1: Single Episode General Aggression Model (ibid)
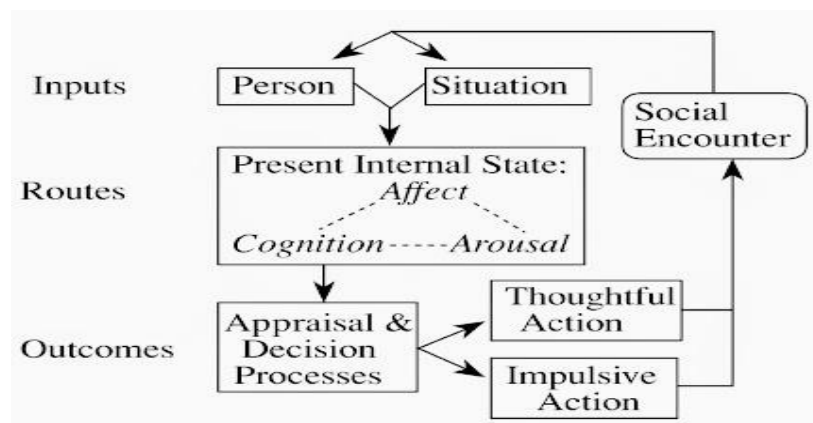
Social Learning Theory

According to this theory, behaviours are learnt from both direct and indirect experiences. However learning largely depends on the rewards and punishment that come as a consequence of that specific action (Bandura, 1971, p 3). Mass media is one of the major sources of learning for anyone. The foundations of this theory are that aggression is consequently learnt after observing models and then media facilitate the ideas and thoughts which turn into behaviours (Hart and Kritsonis, 2006).

The risk factors that are capable of influencing a child are attractive perpetrators, justified violence, no consequences to victim, violence is unpunished and the violence is real to the viewer (ibid). When applied to violent video games, it can be concluded that players are directly reinforced and motivated for their aggressive action because they are earning points and coins

and for the above reasons. Moreover violent video games expose the players to modelling, reinforcement and rehearsal of behaviours. The social learning theory thereby states that being exposed to violent video games would arouse behaviours similar to the player in the game.

Catharsis Effect

This study construes the term catharsis as "venting" anger through the exposure of media violence. Venting one's anger or frustration on the media decreases the probability of indulging in future violence (Gentile, 2013). However Gentile further elaborated that there are many other research which substantiated the contrary of catharsis effect. Nevertheless in a more recent research it was found that the level of frustration decreased after the participants watched a violent movie and this goes in line with the catharsis effect (Dragomir et al., 2011).

Third Person Effect (TPE)

Third Person Effect (TPE) occurs when an individual believes that other people other than himself may be influenced by violent media (Antonopuolos et al., 2015). Hence perceiving himself as more intelligent and less vulnerable to the undesirable effects of violent media, he bowdlerises those effects even if violent media is generally considered harmful to all individuals (Wan and Youn , 2004). The gaps between the perception of oneself and others were discovered to be significant in various aspects such as political issues, violent media content and video games. Logically, people have the tendency to view those who are younger as more vulnerable, less experienced and less wise (Scharrer and Leone, 2006).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research deals mostly with behaviours, perception and attitudes of people, thus giving a high scope of information. As per most behavioural and social scientists, it is recommended to use qualitative method of research to better understand the reality of society and focus group is among those methods (Sagoe, 2012).

Focus groups involve choosing and grouping a group of willing individuals to measure the beliefs about a subject (Hagan, 2005). While using such methods, the researcher becomes aware of what people think, their experiences regarding the topic, in what ways they perceive it and why. This is one of the core benefits as it fuels credible, diverse and meticulous answers which a researcher would not get in individual interviews.

This paper seeks to assess effects of violent video games among young adolescents aged 10 to 14. Therefore for each age, 10 participants namely 5 girls and 5 boys were selected. The effects are a huge spectrum, a multitude of behaviours that can vary from a minor verbal aggression to a deadly physical one. Thus it is quite difficult to know the impacts through surveys given their limitations. That is why this paper decided on focus group.

FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

For the past few decades, a wide range of research has proved that there is an ongoing relationship between the presence of violence in video games and the existence of aggression (Greitmeyer, 2015). There is a strong connection between hostility and aggression in thoughts and behaviour and playing violent video games (Hasan et al., 2013). Several theories have been devised to describe the relationship between violent video games and aggression.

The General Aggression Model (GAM)

The present analysis failed to sustain the hypothesis that playing violent video game leads to either long and short term aggression. The majority of participants who played violent video games did not display any aggressive traits afterwards. No aggressive behaviour was therefore established. Nevertheless, the majority of them reported that they get angry when they lose but the defeat does not make them aggressive. Likewise, no difference was found even after the long term exposure. This result aligns with the research of Ferguson et al. (2008). In a more

recent research, Elson proved that violent video games do not lead to aggressive behaviours, hence not supporting the GAM (Elson, 2011). In this current research, instead of aggression, a relative quantity of the participants mentioned that playing games makes them feel happy and relaxed. This finding is supported by the findings of Granic et al. (2014).

Social Learning Theory
Video games are highly interactive and the permutation of interactivity as well as numerous practices is a powerful tool for learning (Anderson and Warburton, 2012). In this focus group a few participants mentioned that they do learn fighting techniques or self-defence skills from video games. Around 80% of the boys fantasied about killing and teasing policemen. However most of them reported that they do not imitate the violence they learn. Another boy apprised us that he emulated his favourite player in a physical brawl but insisted that even if he had not played violent video games, he would still have beaten up his opponent.

This gibes with the research of Ferguson who further explained that violent video games and aggression are not related either directly or indirectly (Ferguson, 2008). This opposes the research conducted by Meyers whose findings were in line with social learning theory since her participants were more aggressive after playing violent video games (Meyers, 2002).

Catharsis Effect
This study revealed that around 40% of the boys use violent video games as a way to vent out their anger, frustration and stress. This is more likely to support the catharsis theory which is about freeing negative emotions through fictional involvement in violent acts (Florea, 2013). This result supports the research of Ferguson and Rueda (2010) who found that VVG do not increase aggressiveness instead they reduce depression, frustration and anger. Ferguson and Olson (2013) also established that one of the aims for playing video games was the reduction of stress.

Third Person Effect (TPE)
The participants in this study believed that violent games can have a "third person effect" therefore most of them do not let their younger siblings be exposed to violent video games. They asserted that their younger siblings might be unable to distinguish between virtual and real world. Thus they might end up copying the violence. However girls who played non-violent games allowed their younger siblings to watch and play along. This data is congruent with that of Scharrer and Leone (2006) who found that younger children are more vulnerable to violent video games. The result of this paper further aligns with two other studies conducted by Villani et al. (2005). They discovered that children under the age of 9 are highly vulnerable to violent images. On the other hand Sande et al. (2015) proved that games help children to formulate strategies and do better at problem solving.

Limitation
This research has several limitations. One major weakness was that the researchers could not ask respondents about the effects of sexualised content of video games. Due to cultural reasons, many parents would have refrained from giving their consent if questions on this topic were included. We considered only one mechanism underlying the link between violent video games and aggression which is the General Aggression Model. Hence, risk factors, which are other variables for aggression, could not be analysed in depth. It was not possible to ponder upon all the risk factors for aggression in young adolescents given the depth of the topic.

Another limitation is the small sample size. The data collected for this paper was taken from 50 young adolescents out of whom 40 attended the same school. Therefore they represent only a minor proportion of the group's opinions. Hence the data should not be generalised in all other schools in different regions.

Self-reporting data is another drawback. Self-report data is dependent on the participants' discernment. Hence they could have agreed to the questions presented by the researchers in order to please them or they lied to better portray themselves. Another limitation was that the girls were not as responsive as expected. They were less involved in the discussion compared to the boys. Despite the encouragement and prompts given by the researchers, the girls were still hesitant.

Recommendations

Parents'monitoring of VVG: In this study it has been found that parents do not bother about the types of games that their children play. This is as important for children as it is for young adolescents. Therefore parents should check the Entertainment Software Rating Board to better learn about the content of the game and decide whether it is age appropriate or not.

Sports Video Games: As the participants have reported, sports video games have helped them to practice sports often, be physically active and consequently to play better in real life. Thus parents may encourage their children to play sports video game to instil sports interest in them. However, in addition to allowing them to play sports video games, parents ensure that their childen are doing physical exercises.

Video games in bedrooms: Andria Norcia (2014), director of Sutter Health, advised that, to exert an efficient control over their children, parents should avoid installing video games in their bedrooms. Otherwise the parents would have lesser control over the number of hours and types of games the children play.

Parental Communication: Parents should discuss with their children to grasp the latter's understanding of VVG. This is a chance for the children to open up to their parents and share their feelings. Moreover parents should strictly warn their children about potential threats and dangers of playing online with random strangers. In this study many young adolescents reported that they have befriended new people both locally and internationally. Therefore the parents should monitor their children so that they do not fall into traps of predators.

Teachers: Children spend the majority of their time at school. Thus teachers should be more alert so that they can identify students who are acting too violently or those who are often exhausted. Therefore if teachers can identify the problem at an earlier stage, they can alert the parents and necessary measures can be taken. The teachers can even talk to the class about the negative consequences of playing violent video games and make more students aware of it.

Violent Video games (VVG) and Risk Factors: VVG alone does not directly cause violent behaviour yet it can be classified as a risk factor. Risk factors such as bullying, domestic violence or low IQ, along with violent video games can make the children more prone to violent behaviour. Therefore parents should avoid, as far as possible, to expose their children to risk factors and they can do that by providing them with more protective factors.

CONCLUSION

In this new era children and young adolescents are more digital-friendly and fans of video games. The theoretical literature depicts how violence is learnt and then put into practice in different ways. Consequently the findings if this research were inconsistent with the hypothesis that violent video games contribute to aggression. This finding did not support the GAM since none of the boys reported t to have displayed aggressive behaviour after playing violent video games. This went against the research Zhang and Gao (2014). Nevertheless it was in line with the results of Ferguson et al (2008). Moreover although the boys fantasied about killing and teasing people, they attested that they do not imitate such acts as social learning theory of aggression predicted. The participants further broached that they knew the difference between real and virtual world. The participants contemplated the negative effects of VVG on their younger siblings because the children might imitate what they would see. An advantage was

unveiled when the boys confirmed that sports violent video games helped them to play better on field.

The findings of this study are similar to that of Gamulak and Webber (2011). Moreover unlike most girls, boys preferred to play with others- elder brother, cousins and friends and this may in turn increase communication and strengthen their bonds. Many mentioned that they made friends from other countries which can be a good initiative but at the same time this could be precarious. Furthermore the catharsis effect was supported in this study when a relative number of boys asseverated that after a bad event, they vent their anger by playing violent video games. This finding confirms that of Ferguson and Olson (2013). Gender difference was also found. Majority of the girls preferred non violent video games unlike the boys who insisted that violence is mandatory in any video game.

The findings of this study are interesting and should pave the way for further research which can test the relationship between violent video games and aggression among other Mauritian adolescents.

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