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ENGLISH SUMMARY

A different(ial) perspective: How social context influences the media violence-aggression relationship among early adolescents

Does violence on television and in games make teens more aggressive? The answer to this question is subject to passionate debates among parents, children, journalists, and academics. Some of them are convinced that kids become more aggressive after playing *Call of Duty* or *Grand Theft Auto*, and others are equally convinced that this is not the case. These discussions often implicitly assume that media violence will influence all youth in the same way: Either (all) teens become more aggressive, or they (all) don't. But this does not really match with our everyday experience of media effects, where simply not everyone gets emotional when watching *Love Actually* or aroused when watching *Die Hard*. This is because there are many differences among teens, such as in their disposition, developmental level, or social context. It doesn't seem logical, then, to expect that effects of media violence exposure are the same for all teens (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013a, 2013b). Instead, it is better to ask *which* teens become more aggressive as a result of media violence exposure. That was the main aim of this dissertation. Rather than assuming that the effect of media violence on aggression is the same for everyone, this dissertation investigated whether *some* adolescents are more vulnerable to media violence. To that end, we investigated the social context of adolescents – their family, parents, and peers – and how this influences the relationship between media violence and aggression.

Conclusions

For this dissertation, a large-scale study was set up in which circa 500 Dutch families with children between 10 and 14 years old were tracked for several years. The dissertation reports the results of five empirical studies. Together, these studies provide five main conclusions about the relationship between media violence and aggression:

1. Media violence exposure does not lead to an increase in aggression over time for *all* adolescents.
2. *Some* adolescents do become more aggressive as a result of playing violent games or watching violent television programs. Specifically, media violence was related to increased aggression among teens who are growing up in a high conflict family or who perceive much aggression in their peer group.
3. Other teens may even become *less* aggressive as a result of media violence

exposure. Among teens in positive or neutral social contexts (environments without aggression in the family or peer group), media violence exposure was either not related to aggression, or related to *lower* aggression at a later time.

4. The reason that some teens become more, and others less aggressive as a result of media violence exposure is because teens in different social contexts *experience* such media content in different ways. For example, teens in high conflict families experienced more arousal during violent game play, which was related to higher aggressive behavior. Among youth with many aggressive friends, media violence increased their perception that these peers approve of aggression. On the other hand, youth whose friends were not aggressive thought that their friends would be *less* approving of aggression. These differences in perception were related to increased versus decreased aggressive behavior, respectively.
5. Lastly, this dissertation showed that measures in which adolescents themselves estimate the amount of time spent with media violence are valid ways of assessing such exposure. Still, there is plenty of room left for improvement.

These findings show that it is meaningful and necessary to consider differences between media users when studying media effects. This helps us to better grasp the subtle nature of media effects in teens' lives. In addition, this dissertation shows that more attention for the role of social context in media research is justified.

Practical implications

Practically, this dissertation provides two take-aways for parents, teachers, and other people involved in children's behavior. First of all, **media violence exposure is not directly problematic for the majority of children and adolescents**. Most of the teens surveyed in this dissertation did not become more aggressive over time as a result of violent game play or violent TV viewing. Therefore, this dissertation does not indicate a need for large-scale, one-size-fits-all interventions in which violent games are banned from stores or parents are encouraged to prohibit all violent media content. At the same time, this dissertation does not suggest that youth should endlessly binge on violent games and television programs. The adage "too much of anything is always a bad thing" certainly applies here too, and children may not always be ready for certain content from a developmental perspective. It remains important for parents to play a guiding role in their children's media use, because they are in the best position to evaluate whether certain content is appropriate for *their* individual child. To achieve this, parents can learn more about violent media entertainment through rating systems such as Kijkwijzer and PEGI (Pan European Game Information), by trying media themselves (perhaps together with their children), and use their own expertise

as a parent to determine whether the content is right for their child.

Second, **concerns about media violence exposure are warranted for youth growing up in negative social environments.** Media violence exposure is an additional risk factor for adolescents in high conflict families or aggressive peer groups. However, the effect of media violence on aggression was quite small even in these vulnerable groups. Still, for teachers and health care professionals working with these teens and their families it is good to know that reducing media violence exposure (especially when done in dialogue with the teen) can be a small but helpful step in the right direction.

This dissertation contributes to the scientific literature and the public debate by investigating *which* early adolescents become more aggressive as a result of media violence exposure, rather than assuming that such effects are present or absent for all youth. Although the rhetoric surrounding media violence effects seems to suggest that effects are either large and important, or small and unimportant, the conclusion of this dissertation is that media violence can have a small yet meaningful effect on youths' aggressive behavior. Adolescents in negative social contexts become slightly more aggressive over time as a result of playing violent games and watching violent television shows. On the other hand, adolescents growing up in normal or positive social environments tended to show no change in or even *less* aggressive behavior as a result of media violence exposure. This shows that there is no one-size-fits-all answer to media effects questions. Instead, it is more meaningful – theoretically, empirically, societally – to acknowledge that media plays a complex role in children's lives. By applying a different(ial) perspective to the classic question of media violence and aggression, this dissertation offers important new insights and a step towards a more balanced understanding of media violence effects.

NEDERLANDSE SAMENVATTING

Een differentieel perspectief: De invloed van sociale context op de relatie tussen mediageweld en agressie onder jonge adolescenten

Worden tieners agressiever van geweld op televisie en in games? Over het antwoord op deze vraag wordt heftig gediscussieerd door ouders, kinderen, journalisten en wetenschappers. Sommige van hen zijn overtuigd dat tieners inderdaad agressiever worden van het spelen van *Call of Duty* of *Grand Theft Auto*, terwijl anderen even overtuigd zijn van het tegendeel. Tijdens deze discussies gaat men er vaak impliciet vanuit dat mediageweld alle jongeren op dezelfde manier beïnvloedt: Of (alle) jongeren worden agressiever, of ze worden dat (allemaal) niet. Maar dit komt niet overeen met onze alledaagse ervaring met media-effecten, waarbij nu eenmaal niet iedereen even emotioneel wordt van *Love Actually* of even opgejut wordt door *Die Hard*. Dit komt doordat er veel verschillen zijn tussen jongeren in bijvoorbeeld hun temperament, ontwikkelingsniveau, en sociale context. Het is daardoor niet zo logisch om te verwachten dat mediageweld alle tieners op dezelfde manier raakt (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013a, 2013b). Het is eigenlijk beter je af te vragen welke jongeren agressiever kunnen worden van mediageweld. Dit was het belangrijkste doel van dit proefschrift. In plaats van aan te nemen dat het effect van mediageweld op agressie voor iedereen hetzelfde is, onderzoekt dit proefschrift of sommige adolescenten kwetsbaarder zijn voor mediageweld. Daarbij keken we naar de sociale omgeving van adolescenten – hun familie, ouders en vriendjes – en hoe dit de relatie tussen mediageweld en agressie beïnvloedt.

Conclusies

Voor dit proefschrift is een grootschalig onderzoek opgezet waarbij zo'n 500 Nederlandse gezinnen met jongeren tussen de 10 en 14 jaar meerdere jaren werden gevolgd. Dit proefschrift bevat de resultaten van vijf wetenschappelijke artikelen die samen aanleiding geven tot vijf conclusies over de relatie tussen mediageweld en agressie:

1. Mediageweld leidt niet voor *alle* adolescenten tot een toename in agressief gedrag.
2. *Sommige* adolescenten worden wel agressiever door het spelen van gewelddadige games en het kijken van gewelddadige televisieprogramma's.

Bij jongeren die opgroeien in een gezin met veel conflict en bij jongeren die veel agressie ervaren onder hun vriendjes hing mediageweld samen met meer agressief gedrag.

3. Andere jongeren lijken juist *minder* agressief te worden van mediageweld. Voor jongeren in een positieve of neutrale sociale context (een omgeving zonder agressie in het gezin of in de vriendengroep) hing mediageweld niet samen met agressie, of zelfs met *minder* agressie op een later moment.
4. De reden dat sommige jongeren meer, en anderen minder agressief worden door mediageweld is dat jongeren in verschillende sociale contexten zulke media-inhoud verschillend ervaren. Zo voelden tieners in gezinnen met veel conflict meer opwinding (arousal) tijdens het spelen van gewelddadige games, en dit hing samen met meer agressie. Bij jongeren met veel agressieve vrienden hing mediageweld samen met een sterkere perceptie dat hun vrienden agressie goedkeuren. Maar jongeren waarvan de vrienden niet agressief waren, dachten juist dat hun vrienden agressie *minder* goedkeuren als gevolg van mediageweld. Deze verschillen in perceptie hingen vervolgens samen met respectievelijk meer en minder agressief gedrag.
5. Als laatste laat dit proefschrift zien dat meetinstrumenten waarin adolescenten zelf inschatten hoeveel mediageweld ze gebruiken, geschikt zijn om blootstelling aan mediageweld te meten. Er is echter wel nog ruimte voor verbetering.

Deze bevindingen laten zien dat het zinvol en noodzakelijk is om rekening te houden met verschillen tussen mediagebruikers in onderzoek naar media-effecten. Zo kunnen we beter begrijpen hoe subtiele media-effecten plaatsvinden in het echte leven. Daarnaast geeft dit proefschrift aan dat meer aandacht voor de rol van sociale omgeving in media-onderzoek gegrond is.

Aanbevelingen voor de praktijk

Voor de dagelijkse praktijk van bijvoorbeeld ouders, docenten en andere professionals die met kinderen omgaan, levert dit proefschrift twee aanbevelingen op. **Ten eerste is mediageweld niet direct problematisch voor de meerderheid van kinderen en adolescenten.** De meeste kinderen die meededen aan dit onderzoek werden met het verstrijken van de tijd niet agressiever door het spelen van gewelddadige games of kijken naar gewelddadige televisieprogramma's. De resultaten geven dus geen aanleiding tot grootschalige *one-size-fits-all* interventies waarin gewelddadige games uit de winkels worden verwijderd of ouders worden aangemoedigd om mediageweld te verbieden. Tegelijkertijd suggereert dit proefschrift ook niet dat kinderen eindeloos gewelddadige games en televisieprogramma's kunnen gebruiken. Het gezegde "alles

waar te voor staat, is slecht” gaat ook hier op, en kinderen zijn soms nog niet klaar voor bepaalde inhoud vanwege hun leeftijd. Het is daarom belangrijk dat ouders optreden als begeleiders van het mediagebruik van hun kinderen, omdat zij zich in de beste positie bevinden om te beoordelen of bepaalde inhoud geschikt is voor *hun* kind. Om dit te bereiken kunnen ouders proberen meer te weten te komen over de media die hun kinderen willen gebruiken, bijvoorbeeld door beoordelingssystemen als Kijkwijzer of PEGI (Pan European Game Information) te gebruiken, of media zelf te gebruiken (bijvoorbeeld samen met hun kinderen), en door hun eigen expertise als ouder in te zetten.

Ten tweede zijn zorgen over mediageweld wél gegrond voor jongeren die in een negatieve sociale omgeving opgroeien. Mediageweld is een bijkomende risicofactor voor adolescenten in gezinnen met veel conflict of met agressieve vrienden. Wel was het effect van mediageweld op agressie ook in deze kwetsbare groep nog steeds vrij klein. Voor docenten en hulpverleners die met zulke tieners en hun families werken, is het goed om te weten dat minder blootstelling aan gewelddadige games of televisieprogramma’s (zeker als dat in samenspraak met de tiener gebeurt) een kleine maar behulpzame stap in de juiste richting kan zijn.

Dit proefschrift draagt bij aan de wetenschappelijke literatuur en het publieke debat door te onderzoeken welke adolescenten agressiever worden door mediageweld, in plaats van aan te nemen dat zulke effecten aan- of afwezig zijn voor alle jongeren. Hoewel het debat over effecten van mediageweld suggereert dat effecten óf groot en belangrijk, óf klein en onbelangrijk zijn, concludeert dit proefschrift dat mediageweld een klein maar betekenisvol effect kan hebben op agressie onder jongeren. Adolescenten in een negatieve sociale context worden na verloop van tijd iets agressiever door het spelen van gewelddadige games of het kijken van gewelddadige televisieprogramma’s. Aan de andere kant lijken adolescenten in normale of positieve sociale omgevingen niet agressiever of juist iets minder agressief te worden van mediageweld. Dit laat zien dat er geen *one-size-fits-all* antwoord is op vragen over media-effecten. In plaats daarvan is het relevanter – theoretisch, empirisch en praktisch – te erkennen dat media een complexe rol speelt in het leven van jongeren. Door een andere, differentiële blik te werpen op de klassieke kwestie van mediageweld en agressie, levert dit proefschrift nieuwe inzichten en een stap naar een meer gebalanceerd inzicht in de effecten van mediageweld.

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Chapter 2

Assessing the reliability and validity of television and game violence exposure measures

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Author KF had full access to all the data in the study and takes responsibility for the integrity of the data and the accuracy of the data analysis. Study concept and design: KF, JP, and PV. Data acquisition: KF, JP, and PV. Data analysis and interpretation: KF and JP. Manuscript preparation: KF, JP, and PV. All authors read, edited and approved the final manuscript.

Chapter 3

Double dose: High family conflict enhances the effect of media violence exposure on adolescents' aggression

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Chapter 4

A matter of style? The differential effects of parental mediation on early adolescents' media violence exposure and aggression

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Chapter 5

The role of perceived peer norms in the relationship between media violence exposure and adolescents' aggression

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Chapter 6

Beyond the lab: Investigating early adolescents' cognitive, emotional, and arousal responses to violent games

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Karin



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Karin Fickers (April 14, 1986) began her academic career as a bachelor student in Business Communication at the Radboud University Nijmegen. During her bachelor program (2004-2007), she also completed the two-year extracurricular and interdisciplinary Honours Programme. After receiving her bachelor's degree, Karin was admitted to the research master Language and Communication, a joint program at the Radboud University and the University of Tilburg. In 2010, she graduated *cum laude* from this program.

From 2011 to 2015, Karin was a PhD student at the Center for research on Children, Adolescents, and the Media (CcaM), which is part of the Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR) at the University of Amsterdam. During this time, she was a member of the project "The entertainization of childhood," funded by the European Research Council via an Advanced Grant to Professor Patti Valkenburg. Within this project, Karin's research focused on adolescents' social susceptibility to media violence, which resulted in this dissertation. During her time as a PhD student, Karin published her work in high-ranked communication journals such as *Communication Research* and *Media Psychology* and presented at several national and international conferences. In 2014, she spent two months as a visiting scholar at the Annenberg Public Policy Center and the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. Throughout her PhD, Karin has been an active member of the academic community and contributed to professional organizations such as the Netherlands-Flanders Communication Association, where she was co-chair of the Young Scholars Network (2012-2014), and the International Communication Association, where she serves as Secretary of the Children, Adolescents, and Media division (2014-2016).

Since September 2015, Karin works as a postdoctoral researcher at CcaM. In this new role, she continues to work on Patti Valkenburg's ERC-funded project while also contributing to the Consortium on Individual Development (CID), a consortium of researchers from several Dutch universities that is funded through NWO's Gravitation (Zwaartekracht) programme. Within these projects, she aims to achieve a deeper understanding of the role of (violent) media entertainment in children's lives.

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Does violence on television and in games make teens more aggressive? The answer is subject to passionate debates among parents, children, journalists, and academics. Some of them are convinced that youth become more aggressive after playing *Call of Duty* or watching *Game of Thrones*, and others are equally convinced that this is not the case. Rather than assuming that effects of media violence on aggression are the same for all teens, this dissertation investigated *which* adolescents may be more vulnerable to media violence. To that end, this dissertation asked how the social context of adolescents – their family, parents, and peers – influences the relationship between media violence and aggression. The dissertation reports the results of five empirical studies based on data from circa 500 Dutch families with children between 10 and 14 years old. By applying a different(ial) perspective to the classic question of media violence and aggression, this dissertation offers new insights and a step towards a more balanced understanding of media violence effects.