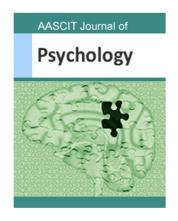
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Association Between Reality Television and Aggression: It Depends on the Show

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Abstract

We examined the association between reality television and viewers' aggression. In Study 1, participants rated the frequency of viewing 110 reality television shows and indicators (e.g., anger, hostility, irritability) of trait aggression. The results showed that consumption was related to aggression, but the association varied depending on the show. In Study 2, participants were randomly assigned to watch a clip from a reality television show that was either high or low in aggressive content prior to rating state hostility and anger. Participants exposed to the high (vs. low) aggressive show reported greater state aggression. Together, the results provide further evidence of the association between aggressive reality television and viewers' own aggression.

1. Introduction

Reality television is an umbrella term to represent a variety of different types of shows [1] that feature non-actors presumably interacting in an unscripted fashion [2]. Despite being one of the most popular genres of television, relatively little research has been devoted to examining the content and influence on viewers within psychology. Regular viewers of reality television indicate watching because the shows are suspenseful, unscripted [3], and entertaining [4]. However, viewers' gratifications and motives for watching reality television are dependent on the show as reality television is diverse in terms of content [2, 5]. Research on specific subgenres of reality television shows content influencing one's behavior. For example, college students who watch reality television beauty shows are more likely to use tanning lamps and tan outdoors [6]. Further, women who view reality television focused on cosmetic surgery tend to show positive inclinations toward receiving surgery in the future [7], and associations with body dissatisfaction and disordered eating [8]. In the present research we examine the relationship between reality television consumption and trait and state indicators of aggression.

Researchers have long known that the media individuals consume influences attitudes, cognitions, and behaviors [9]. For example, the preference for hentai Japanese animation that contains sexually explicit content is associated with greater endorsement of hostile sexism beliefs [10]. However, media effects can influence more than beliefs. A meta-analysis of the violent video game literature showed that playing violent video games increases players' aggressive thoughts, feelings, and behavior [11]. The association between media content and aggression, however, is not unique to video games, but has been observed for television, films, and music [12]. Furthermore, the influence of violent

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media on consumers is found with both short and long-term exposure [13]. Thus, depending on the content of the media, viewing aggressive acts by characters in that media should be related to viewers' aggression.

There is reason to expect that viewers of some types of reality television shows (i.e., those with aggressive content) will report greater levels of trait (a tendency to harm others that is stable across time) and state (a temporary desire to harm others dependent on the situation) aggression. Reality television contains more aggressive acts than non-reality programs [14]. Individuals portrayed in reality television tend to be verbally competitive [15]. Viewers of reality television report greater motivational trait of feeling above average and self-importance [16]. Beyond the content itself and characteristics of viewers, the aggressive acts of characters on reality television have an influence on viewers. Viewers of the subgenre of "surveillance" reality television perceived women as argumentative and perceived others as having relationship problems in real life [17]. The degree of reality television viewing was positively correlated with relational aggression for adolescent girls, however, the association was non-significant when accounting for other individual characteristics [18]. Lastly, high school students' degree of viewership of reality television that contains aggressive content predicts students' own social aggression [19]. Together, prior research indicates that, at least for some subgenres, reality television contains aggressive content, and depending on the content of the program, viewers' beliefs and attitudes match the content.

The purpose of the present research is to examine the association between reality television consumption and indicators of aggression. In Study 1, participants rated their frequency of watching 110 reality television shows and indicators of trait aggression (e.g., anger, hostility, irritability). Based on prior research showing a relationship between reality television with aggressive content and social aggression [19], we predict that frequency of viewing of some, but not all reality television shows will be associated with indicators of aggression. We expect the relationship to vary such that the strongest association will be with shows with aggressive content. In Study 2, participants were randomly assigned to view a clip from either a low or high aggressive content reality television show prior to rating state indicators of aggression. We predict that those participants who viewed high aggressive content (vs. low) will report greater state aggression.

2. Study 1

The purpose of Study 1 was to examine whether frequency of viewing reality television programs is related to trait aggression and irritability. We predict that reality television programs that often contain individuals who display aggressive behaviors will be related to viewers' trait aggression and irritability.

2.1. Participants and Procedure

Participants (N = 276, 76.1% women; $M_{\rm age} = 23.48$, SD = 8.00) received partial course credit toward their introductory psychology requirement. Participants indicated their ethnic/racial category as White (44.6%), African American (29%), Hispanic (15.6%), multiracial (5.1%), Asian/South Pacific Islander (4%), Indigenous Peoples (1.4%), or Central Asian/Indian/Pakistani (0.4%). Participants rated their frequency of watching various reality television shows and measures of trait aggression and irritability.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Reality Television Viewing Frequency

To assess the frequency of reality television viewing participants rated how often they watched 110 different reality shows on a scale from 0 = never to 6 = often (see Table 1 for a list of shows).

2.2.2. Trait Aggression

To assess trait aggression we adopted a measure from prior research [20]. The measure contains four subscales assessing anger (7 items; e.g., "I have trouble controlling my temper;" M=2.70, SD=1.19; $\alpha=.82$), hostility (8 items; e.g., "I wonder why sometimes I feel so bitter about things;" M=2.80, SD=1.35; $\alpha=.87$), physical aggression (9 items; e.g., "Once in a while I can't control the urge to strike another person;" M=3.03, SD=1.19; $\alpha=.83$), and verbal aggression (5 items; e.g., "When people annoy me, I may tell them what I think of them;" M=3.30, SD=1.27; $\alpha=.80$). All items were rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale, from 1=strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree.

2.2.3. Irritability

To assess trait irritability we adopted a measure from prior research [21]. The 20 item (e.g., "Sometimes people bother me just by being around") measure was rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale, from $1 = strongly \ disagree$ to $7 = strongly \ agree$ (M = 2.70, SD = 1.24; $\alpha = .95$).

3. Results and Discussion

To examine whether frequency of viewing specific reality television shows is related to dimensions of trait aggression and irritability we conducted a series of correlations between frequency of viewing and aggression measures. As shown in Table 1, significant positive correlations were observed between frequency and anger (41 shows), hostility (34 shows), physical aggression (42 shows), verbal aggression (14 shows), and irritability (41 shows).

Two general outcomes are apparent in the results. First, not all reality television programing is related to viewers' trait aggression and irritability. We suggest that shows that are related to aggression are those in which the content of the program includes individuals who model aggressive language and behaviors (e.g., *Real Housewives*). Second, reality

television shows, for which there was a correlation between frequency of viewing and anger, also tended to show correlations with the other dimensions of aggression and irritability. In other words, individuals who frequently viewed these programs showed multiple indicators of trait aggression. Although the results provide initial evidence of a relationship between aggression and consumption of particular reality television programs, the present study was correlational. To examine a causal relationship between reality television viewing and aggression we conducted a second study.

Table 1. Mean (Standard Deviation) of Frequency of Viewing and Correlations between Frequency and Indicators of Aggression.

Television Show	Frequency (SD)	Anger	Hostile	Physical	Verbal	Irritable
Hoarding: Buried Alive (TLC)	0.95 (1.60)	036	024	.070	.053	.004
Say Yes to the Dress (TLC)	1.59 (2.12)	023	005	.004	033	.006
Hell's Kitchen (Fox)	1.12 (1.66)	021	.090	.095	.053	.048
Cupcake Wars (Food Network)	1.12 (1.72)	021	003	.065	.053	.017
Forensic Files (truTV)	0.86 (1.67)	019	.058	.077	049	.009
Restaurant: Impossible (Food Network)	0.67 (1.46)	016	.055	.045	006	.023
Deadliest Catch (Discovery)	0.82 (1.49)	014	.085	.105	025	003
The Voice (NBC)	1.83 (2.10)	013	.006	.058	.045	017
American Pickers (History)	0.72 (1.50)	010	.053	.068	.024	.007
Chopped (Food Network)	1.47 (2.00)	008	006	.055	.062	.013
America's Funniest Home Videos (ABC)	1.95 (1.95)	006	.061	.147*	.019	.064
Impractical Jokers (truTV)	1.02 (1.81)	004	.082	.148*	.094	.139*
Cake Boss (TLC)	1.36 (1.82)	.004	.024	.105	.055	.019
Gold Rush (Discovery)	0.38 (1.20)	.005	.020	.026	123*	026
Duck Dynasty (A&E)	1.18 (1.84)	.008	.051	.076	.019	.030
The Next Food Network Star (Food Network)	0.43 (1.22)	.015	.037	.051	.000	.030
Master Chef (Fox)	0.49 (1.68)	.019	.106	.096	.032	.108
America's Test Kitchen (PBS)	0.42 (1.13)	.019	.035	.007	017	013
	` '					
The Bachelor (ABC)	0.73 (1.55)	.024	.034	101	035	.014
Iron Chef America (Food Network)	0.93 (1.66)	.024	.065	.063	.040	.059
American Idol (Fox)	1.43 (1.67)	.027	.012	.123*	.059	.075
I Shouldn't Be Alive (Discovery)	0.64 (1.44)	.030	.075	.056	.021	.034
What Not to Wear (TLC)	1.19 (1.80)	.031	.033	.013	047	.018
The Bachelorette (ABC)	0.70 (1.58)	.040	.041	096	040	.003
Sister Wives (TLC)	0.58 (1.41)	.042	.062	.051	.041	.047
The Next Iron Chef (Food Network)	0.70 (1.54)	.044	.069	.069	.044	.072
19 Kids and Counting (TLC)	1.04 (1.80)	.044	.024	.043	.010	.051
Undercover Boss (CBS)	1.12 (1.67)	.044	.037	.104	.084	.065
Throwdown! With Bobby Flay (Food Network)	0.53 (1.33)	.046	.038	.066	.003	.089
Project Runway (Lifetime)	0.99 (1.75)	.048	.084	.068	.043	.086
Bar Rescue (Spike TV)	0.82 (1.62)	.049	.062	.147*	.067	.097
Judge Judy (CBS)	1.01 (1.49)	.051	.168**	.184**	.026	.123*
The Amazing Race (CBS)	0.58 (1.35)	.052	.121*	.112	.032	.069
Big Brother (CBS)	0.63 (1.51)	.055	.071	.019	030	.068
Top Chef (Bravo)	0.79 (1.54)	.058	.091	.106	.039	.109
The Biggest Loser (NBC)	0.80 (1.53)	.059	.042	.068	002	.018
Kitchen Nightmares (Fox)	0.69 (1.51)	.060	.049	.070	.036	.075
Storage Wars (A&E)	1.28 (1.85)	.061	.074	.162**	.105	.089
America's Got Talent (NBC)	1.28 (1.63)	.065	.160**	.139*	.069	.129*
Wahlburgers (A&E)	0.50 (1.24)	.067	.023	.087	011	.068
Ice Cold Gold (Animal Planet)	0.25 (0.90)	.067	.069	.049	020	.043
Survivor (CBS)	0.63 (1.37)	.068	.049	.114	.034	.070
Wife Swap (ABC)	1.04 (1.66)	.068	.068	.146*	.125*	.096
Long Island Medium (TLC)	0.65 (1.47)	.072	.050	.100	.040	.072
Pawn Stars (History)	1.52 (1.80)	.074	.112	.150*	.159**	.086
Hotel Impossible (Travel)	0.41 (1.26)	.074	.036	.098	003	.049
The Great Food Truck Race (Food Network)	0.49 (1.24)	.074	.048	.095	.005	.049
	` ′					
Fast N' Loud (Discovery)	0.41 (1.17) 0.47 (1.29)	.076	.053 .139*	.057 .143*	.013	.080
Auction Hunters (Spike TV)	` ′	.077			.071	.090
Shark Tank (ABC)	1.31 (1.83)	.080	.044	.063	.115	.074
Naked & Afraid (Discovery)	0.71 (1.38)	.082	.012	.089	.020	.017
Snapped (Oxygen)	1.01 (1.81)	.082	.009	.173**	.066	.093
Tori & Dean: Home Sweet Hollywood (Oxygen)	0.36 (1.05)	.084	.048	.043	045	.060
Face Off (Syfy)	0.66 (1.40)	.085	.076	.092	.055	.093
Supernanny (ABC)	0.78 (1.47)	.086	.067	.071	.029	.061
Preachers' Daughters (Lifetime)	0.75 (1.55)	.090	.120*	.100	047	.121*
Cops (Spike TV)	1.25 (1.76)	.091	.173**	.267**	.104	.138*
Ax Men (History)	0.30 (1.06)	.092	.090	.085	020	.079

Television Show	Frequency (SD)	Anger	Hostile	Physical	Verbal	Irritable
Paranormal Witness (Syfy)	0.70 (1.42)	.093	.113	.164**	.057	.076
Ink Master (Spike TV)	0.96 (1.72)	.095	.039	.207**	.207**	.095
American Restoration (History)	0.42 (1.18)	.097	.124*	.094	.029	.098
Intervention (A&E)	0.90 (1.74)	.098	.013	.095	.046	.090
The Ultimate Fighter (Fox)	0.37 (1.09)	.102	.140*	.175**	.067	.112
So You Think You Can Dance (Fox)	0.74 (1.54)	.103	.083	.121*	.098	.093
The Challenge (MTV)	0.58 (1.42)	.105	.134*	.099	.078	.138*
Dance Moms (Lifetime)	1.29 (1.92)	.106	.091	.006	.022	.097
America's Next Top Model (The CW)	1.36 (1.81)	.111	.102	.136*	.094	.162**
The Profit (CNBC)	0.22 (0.82)	.115	.088	.033	.004	.049
Toddlers & Tiaras (TLC)	0.92 (1.67)	.118	.098	.145*	.093	.135*
Hardcore Pawn (truTV)	0.73 (1.53)	.122*	.168**	.245**	.154*	.160**
T.I. & Tiny: The Family Hustle (Vh1)	1.06 (1.89)	.124*	.098	.234**	.052	.157**
The Little Couple (TLC)	0.83 (1.61)	.127*	.093	.144*	.073	.154*
Dating in the Dark (ABC)	0.26 (0.88)	.129*	.104	.088	.014	.090
True Life (MTV)	0.20 (0.88)	.131*	.133*	.192**	.103	.121*
` '	` /	.131	.037	.159**	.089	.112
Here Comes Honey Boo Boo (TLC)	0.81 (1.61)		.110			
The Celebrity Apprentice (NBC)	0.46 (1.29)	.137*		.068	.075	.144*
Flipping Out (Bravo)	0.31 (1.03)	.139*	.149*	.069	016	.121*
The Real Housewives of Atlanta (Bravo)	0.92 (1.86)	.139*	.181**	.184**	.056	.172**
16 and Pregnant (MTV)	1.15 (1.84)	.141*	.051	.163**	.068	.136*
Tabatha Takes Over (Bravo)	0.30 (1.03)	.143*	.149*	.106	.001	.103
Amish Mafia (Discovery)	0.43 (1.21)	.143*	.097	.111	.024	.109
Real Husbands of Hollywood (BET)	0.95 (1.85)	.143*	.137*	.300**	.147*	.196**
The Real Housewives of Orange County (Bravo)	0.46 (1.29)	.144*	.179**	.076	.058	.148*
Keeping Up with the Kardashians (E!)	1.28 (1.97)	.147*	.044	.110	.090	.102
The X Factor (Fox)	1.03 (1.61)	.147*	.095	.188**	.153*	.149*
Dancing with the Stars (ABC)	0.88 (1.54)	.149*	.140*	.196**	.119*	.129*
Teen Mom (MTV)	1.26 (1.87)	.149*	.079	.214**	.134*	.157**
The Real L Word (Showtime)	0.30 (1.03)	.152*	.149*	.150*	.099	.132*
Parking Wars (A&E)	0.32 (1.10)	.153*	.086	.169**	.133*	.098
Ice Road Truckers (History)	0.32 (1.03)	.153*	.135*	.159**	.077	.160**
Mob Wives (Vh1)	0.75 (1.67)	.155**	.188**	.231**	.118*	.213**
The Next (The CW)	0.21 (0.79)	.161**	.127*	.065	.014	.106
Love & Hip Hop Hollywood (Vh1)	0.95 (2.00)	.162**	.095	.185**	.055	.155**
Vanderpump Rules (Bravo)	0.28 (0.97)	.164**	.105	.063	.002	.098
Million Dollar Listing Miami (Bravo)	0.30 (0.99)	.168**	.155*	.108	.047	.138*
Millionaire Matchmaker (Bravo)	0.45 (1.18)	.172**	.190**	.110	.068	.162**
Parental Control (MTV)	1.06 (1.72)	.173**	.184**	.219**	.078	.221**
The Real Housewives of New Jersey (Bravo)	0.37 (1.13)	.174**	.152*	.103	.047	.153*
RuPaul's Drag Race (LOGO)	0.69 (1.57)	.174**	.165**	.165**	.122*	.241**
The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills (Bravo)	0.45 (1.29)	.175**	.101	.083	.019	.142*
Million Dollar Listing NY (Bravo)	0.38 (1.10)	.178**	.222**	.097	.038	.191**
The Real Housewives of New York City (Bravo)	0.35 (1.07)	.182**	.131*	.112	.068	.157**
Million Dollar Listing Los Angeles (Bravo)	0.35 (1.07)	.183**	.206**	.092	.034	.184**
The Real Housewives of Miami (Bravo)	0.36 (1.13)	.184**	.129*	.146*	.058	.134*
Love & Hip Hop Atlanta (Vh1)	1.13 (2.15)	.193**	.109	.228**	.106	.176**
		.193	.081	.228 .196**	.096	.208**
Couples Therapy (Vh1)	0.56 (1.39)	.197	.159**			.187**
Opposite Worlds (Syfy)	0.21 (0.80)	.215		.101 .190**	.103	
Jerseylicious (Style)	0.28 (0.95)		.119*		.118*	.192**
Snooki & JWOWW (MTV)	0.71 (1.53)	.228**	.187**	.238**	.162**	.219**
Bad Girls Club (Oxygen)	1.19 (2.02)	.263**	.190**	.360**	.174**	.286**

Note. * p < .05, ** p < .01.

4. Study 2

The purpose of Study 2 was to examine the influence of a short exposure of reality television that was either related or unrelated to aggression in Study 1 on participants' state hostility and anger. We predict that exposure to aggressive reality television will elicit greater state hostility and anger than reality television that is relatively absent of aggressive characters.

4.1. Participants and Procedure

Participants (N = 164, 83.5% women; $M_{\rm age} = 21.10$, SD = 4.62) received partial course credit toward their introductory psychology requirement. Participants indicated their ethnic/racial category as White (47.6%), African American (29.3%), Hispanic (13.4%), Asian/South Pacific Islander (4.9%), multiracial (3.7%), or Central Asian/Indian/Pakistani (1.2%). Participants were randomly assigned to watch reality television that contained aggressive content or not prior to

rating state hostility and anger measures.

4.2. Measures

4.2.1. Reality Television Stimuli

Participants were randomly assigned to watch a 15-minute clip from either *The Voice* (low aggressive stimuli) or *Bad Girls Club* (high aggressive stimuli). These two reality television programs were chosen because in Study 1 they showed relatively high viewership and were either correlated with dimensions of aggression or not.

4.2.2. State Hostility

Hostility was assessed with 15 items (e.g., "Right now I feel hostile") adapted from prior research [22]. Participants rated the items on a 7-point Likert-type scale, from 1 = $strongly\ disagree\ to\ 7 = strongly\ agree\ (\alpha = .95)$.

4.2.3. State Anger

Anger was assessed with 10 items (e.g., "I feel angry") adopted from prior research [23]. Participants rated the items on a 7-point Likert-type scale, from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree ($\alpha = .90$).

5. Results and Discussion

To examine whether a brief exposure to reality television related to high or low trait anger influenced participants' felt hostility and state anger we conducted a MANOVA with condition (high vs. low anger content) as the independent variable and hostility and state anger as dependent variables. The omnibus test was significant, Wilks' $\Lambda = 0.71$, F(2, 161)= 32.90, p < .001, $\eta_p^2 = .29$. Participants who viewed low anger content (M = 1.42, SD = 0.58) reported less hostility than participants exposed to the high anger content (M =2.75, SD = 1.31), F(1, 162) = 66.19, p < .001, $\eta_p^2 = .29$. Additionally, participants exposed the low anger content (M = 1.16, SD = 1.31) reported less state anger than participants exposed to the high anger content (M = 1.90, SD = 0.92), F(1, 162) = 43.34, p < .001, $\eta_p^2 = .21$. Together, the results show that a short exposure to reality television that varies in aggressive content impacts viewers state hostility and anger.

6. General Discussion

The purpose of the present research was to examine the association between consumption of reality television and indicators of aggression. As predicted, in Study 1 frequency of viewing reality television shows was associated with greater trait aggression, but the association varied depending on the show (i.e., shows with presumably greater aggressive content). As predicted, in Study 2, participants exposed to a clip of a show with high aggressive content (vs. low) reported greater state hostility and anger. Together, the results show that reality television is associated with viewers' trait and state aggression, however, that association depends on the content of the particular program.

Similar to past research showing a relationship between

violent media and consumers' aggression [12, 13], and past research showing an association between reality television and aggression [18, 19], the present results provide evidence that reality television programs with aggressive content is related to viewers' aggression. The present research differs from past studies examining reality television in two ways. First, Ferguson and colleagues [18] asked participants to rate frequency with four genres of reality television shows, while Ward and Carlson [19] asked participants to rate the frequency of viewing 23 shows that were preselected based on prior ratings indicating that those shows were perceived as containing a high amount of social aggressive acts. The present research included a wide variety of reality television programs to show that the content of the show matters (Study 1). In effect, not all reality television shows or subgenres are related to aggression. Second, while the prior research was correlational, we manipulated the show that participants were exposed to in order to show a causal effect of reality television exposure on state aggression.

Although the present research adds to the relatively scant empirical research examining reality television, the research is limited in terms of generalizability. First, the present research was conducted with college students at one university. Although we expect similar results would be obtained with older adults and individuals in other cultural spaces. Second, in Study 1, we show an association between frequency of viewing and aggression, we did not assess participants' perceptions of those shows as containing aggressive content. However, based on the list of shows that tended to be associated with aggression, we argue that those shows do contain more aggressive content than the shows that were non-significantly related to aggression. Third, in Study 2, we only included two shows, thus, the results may be due to a particular aspect of those shows rather than the degree of aggressive content. Future research may include further stimuli to provide greater evidence that the show content and not a specific episode or a specific show led to the observed results. Fourth, the means of state hostility and anger in Study 2 were low. However, the exposure was breath and at only one time point. Future research with a longitudinal design may examine the long-term influence of reality television with aggressive components on self-rated aggression.

7. Conclusion

To conclude, the present research showed relationships between frequency of consumption of reality television and indicators of aggression. In Study 1, the frequency of watching certain shows, that presumably contain more aggressive content, was related to trait aggression. In Study 2, participants exposed to a show with aggressive content rated state aggression higher than participants exposed to a show with little or no aggressive content. Given the popularity of reality television the present results add to the growing body of research examining its influence on viewers.

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