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VIOLENCE IN CHILDREN'S POPULAR TELEVISION PROGRAMS

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PROBLEM

Previous research done on violence in the media has primarily focused on the effects it has on children. Researchers have tried to prove that children's viewing of television violence is linked to negative side effects such as encouraging children to imitate their violent acts in social settings (Simmons, Stalworth and Wentzel, 1999), it's effects can lead to psychological trauma (Singer, et al., 2004), and even that it can have an impact on a child's moral reasoning (Krcmar, Viera, 2005). However, little research has been done on how much violence is portrayed in popular television shows and if it increases with a show's targeted age group. In our study we explore this issue and hypothesize that as a target age for a show increases the amount of violent acts will increase up until shows are directed at a pre-teen audience where the amount of violent acts will begin to decrease.

METHOD

For our research we chose the three most popular TV shows* (www.tv.com) in the following age groups: 2-4, 5-8, 9-11, 12-14. We then randomly selected four episodes from each show's most current season and then examined them for acts of violence. Violence being defined as any physical act with the intent to harm a person, creature or object: including, but not limited to, hitting, kicking, punching, pinching, etc. We then took the mean for each age group based on twenty-minute increments to see if there was an increase or decrease in the amount of violent acts between the targeted age groups.

* (2-4 Barney, Blues Clues, Sesame Street) (5-8 Power Rangers, Pokémon, and Spongebob) (9-11 Avatar, I-Carly, and the Wizards of Waverly Place) (12-14 Glee, the Big Bang Theory, and the Simpson)

RESULTS

2-4 Year Old Category

- Every 20 minutes of TV show contained an average of 0 violent acts

5-8 Year Old Category

- Every 20 minutes of TV show contained an average of 75.1 violent acts

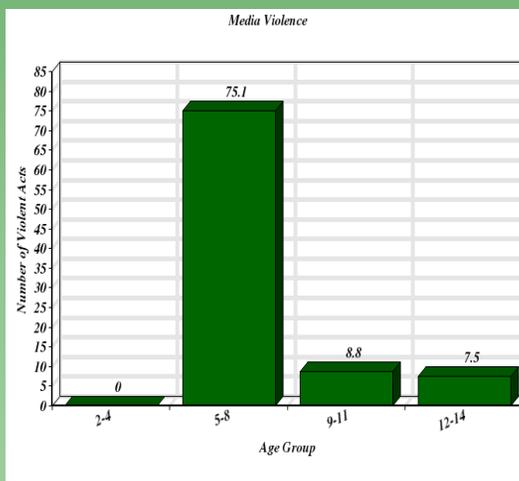
9-11 Year Old Category

- Every 20 minutes of TV show contained an average of 8.8 violent acts

12-14 Year Old Category

- Every 20 minutes of TV show contained an average of 7.5 violent acts

Though not initially the intent of our investigation we found it interesting to note that on average (not taking into account age group differences) for every 20 minutes of animated TV shows there was an average of 15 violent acts, whereas for every 20 minutes of live action there was an average of 28.5. Though if you exclude Power Rangers from the data (as it is an extreme outlier) the average acts of violence drops to 2.



DISCUSSION

We initially hypothesized that the number of violent acts would increase with age up until the pre-teens, because we believed that TV shows would be age appropriate, and thus have less violence for younger viewers. Yet, our data seems to imply the idea that violence is primarily directed at a singular age group among children, the 5-8 year olds. Perhaps, this is in part due to the fact that this particular age group is characterized, in part, by a short attention span. TV show producers must keep these shows short and sweet without a complicated plot, in order to appeal to the child's mindset, and violence is one of the easiest ways to do so.

While we found that cartoon shows, in general (we chose to exclude Power Rangers as it was an extreme outlier), contain more violent acts than live-action TV shows, the live-action shows often contain violence that is much easier to imitate. This could explain why Power Rangers was such an extreme outlier, accounting for 6 times the amount of violence of the next popular show, Pokémon. Children in this age group may be attracted to Power Rangers because they prefer hands-on-experience to passive watching. Older age groups who are more cognitively developed may avoid the show due to its lack of plot and storyline. Additional research on this age related phenomena may perhaps provide information as to why this occurs, as well as any potential impacts.

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