Reasons for Consuming Violent Entertainment

For many years, researchers have wondered what people find attractive in violent entertainment. Why do people watch movies like ‘Saw’ or play first-person shooter games like ‘Call of Duty’? The answer to this question is highly relevant, because convincing evidence exists that individuals who are more attracted to violent entertainment are also more likely to be affected by it, that is, become more aggressive. It is therefore remarkable that research into the appeal of such entertainment has received far less attention than research into its effects. This entry discusses the most common reasons for consuming violent entertainment. Although these reasons are to a certain extent intertwined, three broad categories can be distinguished: person-based, social, and experiential explanations.

Person-based explanations

Although the answer to the question why people consume violent entertainment may seem straightforward (‘because they like it’), such preferences often result from specific personality characteristics. Two characteristics that are typically associated with violent entertainment consumption are sensation seeking and trait aggression. Sensation seeking is a tendency to seek out varied, new, complex, and intense sensations and experiences, and a willingness to take risks in order to have such experiences. Sensation seekers are individuals with a high need for arousal, and consuming violent entertainment is a way to satisfy that need. Males and adolescents typically score higher on sensation seeking, and it is therefore no surprise that violent entertainment is most popular among male adolescents.
Trait aggression – the tendency to react in a hostile and aggressive way – is also related to a preference for violent entertainment. Researchers have proposed that individuals with a more aggressive tendency find such entertainment more meaningful, because it can help them to understand and justify their own behavior. Furthermore, more aggressive individuals may feel more familiar with violent characters and scenarios, making violent entertainment more relevant and attractive.

**Social explanations**

Media use is typically not an individual activity; it is often embedded within a larger social environment. Peers, parents, and society can have a strong direct or indirect influence on which entertainment individuals are exposed to, resulting in three social explanations for why people consume violent entertainment. The first is a ‘me too effect’, that is, people consume violent entertainment because their peers do so. This effect is most common in adolescence when conformity to peers is vital. Violent entertainment consumption is an important way of being part of the group. It also offers adolescents opportunities for social interaction and for showing off their skills in competition with others.

A second social explanation is the ‘forbidden fruit effect’. Parents often intentionally or unintentionally try to protect their children from exposure to violent entertainment by restricting access to it. However, such restrictions often result in the exact opposite effect. Especially in adolescence, restriction of violent entertainment often makes such entertainment even more appealing.

A third social explanation is rooted within gender roles. Society influences violent entertainment use through processes of gender-role socialization. Generally, boys and men are expected and accepted to be more aggressive than girls and women. From an early age onwards, boys learn that violent entertainment is their domain and a way to distinguish
themselves from girls. Thus, by choosing violent entertainment, boys and men are offered a way to discover and reinforce their masculinity.

**Experiential explanations**

Individuals may also seek out violent entertainment because they like the *experience*. Violent entertainment offers two types of experience that can be pleasurable and rewarding: excitation transfer and vicarious aggression. Dolf Zillmann’s excitation-transfer theory proposes that violent entertainment can evoke strong emotions in viewers or players. These emotions are accompanied by arousal, which can carry over onto and strengthen subsequent emotions. For example, people may feel fear for characters in threatening situations in a movie or game, and this fear is accompanied by arousal. When the threatening situation is overcome, the viewer or player experiences relief. The feeling of relief is intensified by the arousal that accompanied the feeling of fear. This intensified relief is what makes violent entertainment especially appealing.

The vicarious aggression explanation suggests that violent entertainment is appealing because it offers viewers and players a way of experiencing, through a character’s eyes, situations that cannot happen or are not allowed in real life. Because violence and aggression are disapproved by society, the only opportunity for people to engage in these behaviors, albeit vicariously, is via violent entertainment. Especially for children and adolescents, it is a way of dealing with the real-life restrictions they encounter daily, such as rules imposed by their parents or school. Watching characters that rebel against such restrictions offers children an opportunity to escape from their everyday limitations.

**The attraction of violent entertainment: An alternative explanation**

Although there are multiple explanations for why individuals consume violent entertainment, the question remains whether it is the violent content that accounts for its attractiveness. Violent movies and games are typically fast-paced, action-packed, and placed
within adventurous contexts, which could also explain why they are so popular. Indeed, a study among Dutch and American children suggests that children who like action in entertainment do not necessarily also like violence. This means that future research should disentangle the liking of violence, action and adventure in entertainment. Only then can we decisively understand why people consume violent entertainment.

Karin M. Fikkers and Patti M. Valkenburg

*See also* Aggression and Enjoyment; Arousal and Aggressive Content, Theory and Psychology of; Excitation-Transfer Theory; Forbidden Fruit Hypothesis; Patterns of Violent Media Consumption; Uses and Gratifications Perspective of Media Effects; Video Games, User Motivations.

**Further Readings**


