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# TELEVISION COMMERCIAL VIOLENCE

## Potential Effects on Children

E. Deanne Brocato, Douglas A. Gentile, Russell N. Laczniak, Julia A. Maier, and Mindy Ji-Song

**ABSTRACT:** Past research has demonstrated that a significant amount of television ads targeted at children have violent content (Shanahan, Hermans, and Hyman 2003). However, little is known about the potentially harmful effects of television commercial violence. To shed light on this important issue, the present research discusses results of multiple focus groups (with children ages 8 to 12 years old and with the parents of these children) and an experimental study. Although parents and children who participated in the focus groups appeared to have few concerns with the potential negative effects of violence in television advertising, the experimental findings indicate that children may be adversely affected by it. Specifically, when exposed to ads with violent content in the focal experiment, subjects (ages 8 to 12) were more apt to generate aggressive cognitions (than when exposed to ads without violent content).

For over 30 years there has been a considerable amount of research dealing with the broadly defined issue of advertising to children. In general, this research has led to two conclusions: Children's responses to ads depend on their developmental stage (older children demonstrate a greater ability to accurately process ad information compared to younger children; John 1999; Ward, Wackman, and Wartella 1977) and parents are concerned about the potentially negative effects that ads may have on their offspring (e.g., Grossbart and Crosby 1984; Laczniak, Muehling, and Carlson 1995). Apparently aware of these conclusions, the industry has responded in a proactive manner by developing (in conjunction with the Council of Better Business Bureaus) the Children's Advertising Review Unit (CARU). CARU is a self-regulatory unit that evaluates ads targeted at children and, if deemed necessary, requests changes through voluntary cooperation of advertisers (CARU 2003). Moreover, CARU developed a set of principles that advertisers can use when creating ads targeted at children

under the age of 12. CARU suggests that if advertisers follow these guidelines, concerns that critics have levied against the industry will be minimized. At the heart of these guidelines is one principle that suggests that ads targeted at younger children should be limited to promoting prosocial products and behaviors. However, recent research questions the degree to which advertisers are complying with this principle (Ji and Laczniak 2007; Schor 2004; Shanahan, Hermans, and Hyman 2003). For example, a study by Shanahan, Hermans, and Hyman (2003) concluded that a significant amount of television ads targeted at children age 12 and younger contain violent content. In fact, this research reported that on Saturday mornings, commercials contained more violent content than did the programs.

These findings are noteworthy since other research provides evidence that there is a correlation between media violence and children's tendencies to behave in less than desirable ways. For example, a study using meta-analytic procedures (Paik and Comstock 1994) concluded that even *brief* exposures to violent content in television programming or films may make children more likely to engage in aggressive behaviors (than those who had not viewed similar subject matter). What is especially troubling, however, is the positive relation that has been identified between children's exposure to violent materials in the media and an increase in their aggressive behaviors

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over the longer term. A recent report published by the U.S. Surgeon General (U.S. Public Health Service 2001) concludes that exposure to violence on television has a significant statistical relationship with aggressive behaviors, and its cumulative effects may lead children to form aggressive personality traits. This conclusion is based on research that has demonstrated that repeated exposure to media violence influences children's knowledge structures regarding aggression, which in turn reinforces aggression-based knowledge structures so as to change personality traits (Anderson and Bushman 2001). Although personality traits are influenced by many factors such as genetics and parental influence, the report paints a more ominous picture in that it notes that youth who currently have aggressive personality traits are more prone to consume media violence (than those having less-pronounced aggressive traits), which creates a vicious cycle of consumption and knowledge-structure reinforcement. Repeated exposures to violence, in turn, are likely to make children even more aggressive in nature, further compounding the problem (termed a "downward spiral" by Slater et al. 2003). Longitudinal studies also provide evidence that early life exposure to media violence may lead children to use more aggressive behaviors over an extended period of time (Anderson et al. 2008; Huesmann et al. 2003). The evidence suggests that the consumption of media violence is one significant risk factor for the development of aggression in children. Given that children rely on ads as an important means of gathering marketplace information (Schor 2004), we feel that the presence of violent content in commercials may be in opposition to the CARU guidelines, which state a goal of promoting prosocial behaviors in children.

However, it is important to mention that some authors note that the effects of media violence are not monolithic. Media violence can provide a fantasy world in which children are able to express certain levels of anger and aggression without harming others (Jones 2002) and provide a safe place for children to experiment with activities that may be unacceptable in real life (Olson, Kutner, and Warner 2008). Other studies note that media violence is only one risk factor among many that lead to aggressive behaviors in children (Ferguson, San Miguel, and Hartley 2009; Ferguson et al. 2008). Furthermore, it is important to note that varying parental actions can protect children from engaging in aggressive and violent behaviors such as family meals (e.g., Fulkerson et al. 2006).

Nonetheless, given the evidence that exposure to violent media influences children's aggressive thoughts and behaviors, research on the possible negative consequences of violent commercials on youth is warranted. Thus, the purpose of the present investigation is to explore the potential effect of commercials containing violent content on children. First, this study briefly reviews psychological theories that suggest why and how media violence influences children's behaviors.

Second, a series of focus groups that were conducted with both parents and children regarding violence in media and television advertising is discussed. Themes were extracted from these groups and integrated with prior research on media violence to develop a set of testable research hypotheses. To shed light on these hypotheses, results are reported from a preliminary investigation conducted to determine whether exposure to violent commercials has the potential to influence aggressive behaviors in children.

## THE INFLUENCE OF MEDIA VIOLENCE ON CHILDREN

### Definitions

To appropriately discuss the theoretical foundations of the effects of media violence on children, it is necessary to provide precise definitions of several key terms. "Violence" is defined by the World Health Organization as "the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, mal-development or deprivation" (Kug et al. 2002, p. 5). Consistent with this definition and prior research in psychology (Anderson and Bushman 2001), the present study defines "media violence" as media-based content that depicts *intentional* attempts by individuals to inflict harm on others. Commercial violence is another form of television content that includes intentional attempts by actors to inflict harm on others. It is important to note that these definitions suggest that a depiction of violence may be live action or animated, and scripted or real (Anderson and Bushman 2001). In addition to being intentional, the definition of violence specifies that the intended harm is to a target who would be motivated to avoid it if possible. Thus, this definition purposefully excludes accidents that lead to harm, but includes intentional acts that may be unsuccessful in causing harm.

### Theory and Research

Many theories have been developed to understand and predict the development of aggressive tendencies in children. Most of these theories are domain specific and focus on neural substrates, specific emotions such as frustration, cognitive constructs, or how aggression is learned via observation. Although each of these specific theories has been tested and supported in specific contexts (see Table 1 for a summary of several studies), they have left the field somewhat fragmented because they focus on the issue of aggression at different levels of analysis. In an effort to integrate these specific ideas into an

**TABLE I**  
**Limited Review of Literature Dealing with Effects of Violence**

Authors	Population	Type of media	Findings
Anderson and Bushman (2001)	Meta-analysis	Violent video games	Violent video games increased aggression in females and males, adults and children, in experimental and nonexperimental studies. Aggressive cognitions were also significantly higher across all areas.
Anderson et al. (2010)	Meta-analysis: cross-cultural comparison	Violent video games	Violent video game exposure was found to be a causal risk factor for aggressive cognition, aggressive behavior, aggressive affect, decreased prosocial behavior, and empathy.
Bensley and Van Eenwyk (2001)	Children	Violent video games	Overall findings: the studies that examined violent video games on young children's aggression were more likely to have consistent significant results compared to the teenage and college/young adult age groups.
Bushman (1998)	College students	TV programs/commercials	Nonviolent condition recalled, recognized more brands and more commercial details than violent condition. Higher anger ratings impaired memory.
Bushman (2005)	Adults	TV programs/commercials	TV programs that were violent or sexual in content reduced the viewers' recall, interest, and likelihood of selecting the advertised brand(s).
Bushman and Anderson (2001)	Meta-analysis: scientific evidence and news reporting	Media violence (general)	Scientific research has demonstrated a significant positive increase in the relationship between media violence and aggression over the past three decades.
Ferguson, San Miguel, and Hartley (2009)	Children	Violent video games	Depression, peer influences, antisocial personality, and parental aggression predicted youth violence, but violent media did not.
Gentile et al. (2004)	Adolescents	Violent video games	Exposure to more violence yielded more hostility, e.g., arguments with teachers, physical fights, and poor school performance.
Olson, Kutner, and Warner (2008)	Male children	Violent video games	Boys like to play electronic games, especially violent ones, for five main reasons: (1) explore/master different environments, (2) experience power/fame fantasies, (3) emotional regulation, (4) social tools, and (5) learning new skills (i.e., sports games).
Olson et al. (2007)	Children	Violent video games	More boys than girls play video games every day, and boys are more likely to play M (mature)-rated games frequently. More hours of play were correlated with more violent video game use.
Paik and Comstock (1994)	Meta-analysis	TV violence	A positive and significant correlation between TV violence and aggressive behavior was found.
Shanahan, Hermans, and Hyman (2003)	Children's commercials	Saturday morning commercials	The level of violence in commercials is higher than the level of violence in programming (commercials are created in isolation). Highest levels of violence are found in the "spots" for upcoming programs.
Wood, Wong, and Chachere (1991)	Meta-analysis children	Media violence	Media violence exposure resulted in a significant increase in the viewers' aggressive behavior. However, the results are not uniform across studies.

overarching theory of aggressive effects, Anderson and Bushman (2001, 2002) developed the General Aggression Model (GAM). The model includes individual difference variables (e.g., personality traits, genetics, history), situational variables (e.g., provocation, learning opportunities), and potential moderating variables (e.g., parental intervention, gender). This

breadth is both the model's greatest strength and weakness—it is so broad that it lacks some of the individual-level details that many of the domain-specific models on which it is based included. However, it is important to note that the GAM has been recently supported in longitudinal studies in both the United States and Japan (e.g., Anderson et al. 2008).

In the short term, the GAM posits that exposure to media violence will lead children to engage in aggressive behaviors via a learning-activation-application mechanism. Specifically, the model suggests that exposure to media violence will likely lead individuals to generate aggressive cognitions that may eventually lead to arousal and other emotional reactions. The GAM further suggests that the child will use these aggressive cognitions to update memory-based knowledge structures regarding aggression and violence. Memory-based knowledge structures for aggression include aggressive behavior scripts (e.g., when provoked one should retaliate), aggressive perceptual schemata (e.g., people dressed in black are potential enemies), and aggressive beliefs (e.g., fighting is acceptable in certain instances). Aggressive behaviors are likely to result when aggressive script-like knowledge structures are cued to action.

According to the GAM, repeated exposures to violence are thought to be especially problematic in that the violent cognitions generated (in response to each exposure) serve as learning trials in which aggressive knowledge structures are rehearsed, reinforced, and updated. Because of this reinforcement, each trial (i.e., exposure to a violent depiction) makes the knowledge structures more automatic and more difficult to change. In other words, repeated exposures to media violence tend to lead children to formulate aggressive cognitions or thoughts that reinforce their existing knowledge structures regarding aggression, making them more resistant to change. Furthermore, once the knowledge structures become more solidified, they become more automatic, such that they become faster to access and act on. Once a person has well-formed knowledge structures regarding aggression, the child can eventually develop more aggressive personality traits. When activated via situational cues, these traits can lead children to act in a more aggressive manner than had they not been exposed to violent episodes in the first place. As noted above, there has been significant support for the GAM in the psychology literature (Anderson, Gentile, and Buckley 2007; Bushman and Anderson 2002; Gentile et al. 2004). Furthermore, it appears that the GAM predicts that even a brief exposure to a violent episode (such as one located within a 30-second television commercial) can lead children to formulate aggressive cognitions, since the violence could easily reinforce aggression-related memory structures. However, such a notion has yet to be tested empirically.

### RESEARCH PHASE I: CHILDREN'S FOCUS GROUPS

The main purpose of the focus group studies was to investigate parents' and children's perception of media violence and explore how television commercial violence *might* influence

children. Because there is a lack of research on children's reactions to violence in commercials, a more exploratory approach was deemed to be appropriate (Strauss and Corbin 1990). This is a unique type of media in that exposure can be very short and may not be viewed as potentially harmful. However, the GAM implies that a child's exposure to even short violent episodes (such as those contained in commercials) may lead to aggression. Given these conflicting possibilities, we felt a qualitative approach to explore perceptions of commercial violence was warranted. Focus groups were chosen as the qualitative method for several reasons, including the ability to leverage the benefits of peer interaction, time restrictions on collecting data, and the ability to assimilate information in a timely manner (Greenbaum 1998). Although there are limitations to focus group research, such as possible bias from peers and leading questions from the moderator, focus groups were chosen as the best method to explore our research questions. Careful consideration was taken in preparing a moderator for the studies to avoid these limitations. The focus groups were conducted with several questions in mind (and so to correspond with the parents' focus groups). These included: How do children classify and define violence? What is the level of parental involvement in the choice of media viewed by children?

### Study Procedures

Participants were recruited from a list developed by researchers at a large Midwestern university (and ultimately consisted of 6 groups with a total of 42 participants). It is important to note that the potential participant list included both people who resided in the university town as well as many who lived in surrounding communities, allowing for a reasonably diverse subject pool. All participants had parental permission to participate in the 90-minute group discussions that were led by a professional moderator. To ensure a high level of objectivity, the moderator was a trained professional who was unaware of the specific aims of the research. The children ranged in age from 7 to 13, with 50% of the respondents being male. As an incentive for participation, each respondent was paid for his time.

Each focus group was audiotaped and transcribed verbatim, yielding 92 pages of single-spaced interview data. To ensure accuracy in the transcription, the tapes were reviewed by a different individual. The transcriptions were used to determine themes across all groups using open coding (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990). Overall themes were evaluated separately by three individuals through an iterative process (Thompson 1997). Each researcher read through the transcripts and determined the overall themes using cross-case analysis and open coding (Beverland, Lindgreen, and Vink 2008). There was little disagreement between the initial

proposed themes and the themes found by the two other researchers. All researchers were able to gain consensus on the emerging themes.

## Resulting Themes

In general, two major themes evolved in the focus group discussions: the first was the role of blood and realism in defining violence and the second involved the perceived lack of parental concern with media (and commercial ad) violence. Each of these themes is discussed below.

### *Defining Violence*

Many of the participants provided a definition of media violence that differed from that which guided this research (intentional harm to victims who would not wish to be harmed). Several conditions were deemed as necessary by the participants in order to classify media content as being violent. For example, when the participants were asked to define violence, their responses focused mainly on the realism and the depiction of blood and gore during the media event. These elements were found to be recurring in the definitions of many participants across all of the groups.

Realism was an important characteristic of violence in relation to the characters being used in a scene. For example, the use of cartoon characters was seen as more fantasy than violence, although the acts performed by the cartoon characters could be defined as violent. If an event occurred in a cartoon, children seemed to not be able to relate to it or believe that it could happen to them. As Robbie explains, cartoon violence differs from “real” violence:

In cartoon violence you're not actually getting hurt. Most of it is silly. (Robbie, 9-year-old)

Many of the children made the association between blood and violence. Even though a televised scene might depict people getting shoved, pushed, thrown to the ground, or even shot, the participants did not view it as a violent episode unless there was blood. Actual blood was a driving force in the perception of violence, as noted by several participants when asked to define violence:

Violence is fighting with weapons, with swords, blood, and gore. (Josh, 7-year-old)

If you blow something up. Something with blood. (Alex, 11-year-old)

A number of the participants made the direct association between blood and violence without regard for the act that caused the blood to occur. In the case of accidents, if there was

blood, it was deemed violent; this again differs for the formal definition that includes *intentional harm*. As another participant explains, tripping and falling can be violent:

Violent is bleeding really bad. Sometimes it's when somebody falls down and they're scratched or bleeding really bad. (Nick, 13-year-old)

These finding suggests that the formal definitions used by researchers to determine violence in the media do not align with how children define it. It seems as though children may be unaware that some television content they are viewing is violent and, thus, there is a concern that since they are unaware of the violence they may not be able to psychologically resist its effects.

### *Parental Concern*

Another emerging theme centered on the level of perceived parental concern for violence in media—especially commercials. Many of the children did *not* feel that their parents were concerned with media violence in general. However, when asked what media parents monitor or restrict because of violent content, participants noted that commercials were *not* included. While it was noted that some parents often had rules about movies, shows, or video games, no participants mentioned having any restrictions on commercials (because of violence). Participants did state that the only commercials parents discouraged them from viewing were trailers for movies (and, in particular, those that they did not want their children to see). According to many of the participants, parents were not really concerned with violence unless it was very bloody or graphic, as this comment from one child participant illustrates:

My parents don't care about violence as long as it is not blood and gore. (Bobby, 9-year-old)

When there was parental control, parents often seemed to exercise differing levels of control. Several participants mentioned that their mothers seemed to be more concerned with what is acceptable to watch as compared to their fathers. The level of parental control seemed to align with what type of shows the parents liked to watch themselves. One explains:

If I am watching TV with my mom, so she tries to make me avoid the bad commercials, but if I'm watching with my dad, he watches really gory shows and he doesn't mind if I'm watching them. (Nate, 10-year-old)

Others explain that their parents differ in regard to what they are able to watch:

My mom doesn't want me to watch different things, and my dad doesn't care. (Stephanie, 12-year-old)

Yeah, yeah, my dad isn't as tight about it as my mom. (Paul, 12-year-old)

This lack of consistency between mothers' and fathers' control was a common theme throughout the focus groups and may pose issues for defining media violence and for setting rules in the household. Overall, the children noted a lack of parental concern for commercials as compared to other media, and when control was enforced, there was a lack of consistency between parents about what children may or may not watch.

## RESEARCH PHASE II: PARENTS' FOCUS GROUPS

### Study Procedures

To explore parents' understanding of violence, and specifically the notion that parents perceive violent television commercials as a potential problem, 6 focus groups were conducted with a total of 40 adults. Parents (12 males and 28 females) were recruited at the same time as the children's focus group participants. Participants engaged in 90-minute group discussions led by a moderator. Generally, participants were the parents of the children who took part in the children's focus groups. Once again, to ensure a high level of objectivity, a professionally trained moderator was used. Parents were paid for their participation in the study. Similar to the children's focus groups, the parent studies were conducted with several broad questions in mind. These included: How do parents classify and define violence? Are parents concerned about commercial violence?

As with the children's focus groups, all sessions were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim, yielding 132 single-spaced pages of interview data, and to ensure accuracy in the transcription, the tapes were again checked by a different individual. The same procedures as the children's focus groups were followed with regard to reading and finding themes in the transcripts.

### Resulting Themes

In general, three major themes evolved in the focus group discussions: the importance of realism in defining violence, a general disbelief that violence in commercials posed a problem, and an ability to handle media violence and mitigate any problems that it might cause children.

#### *Defining Violence*

The parent focus groups provided a definition of violence that differed from the formal definition used by Anderson

and Bushman (2001). Similar to the children's focus groups, parents defined violence in terms of realism and the amount of blood or gore shown. The parents were more concerned with violence that was "realistic" as opposed to cartoon or animation violence. For example, when asked to define violence and state concerns about its effects on his children, a father of three clearly noted the importance of realism:

Bloody body on the floor . . . clearly, animation doesn't bother me as much, but when it is very realistic, it is really disturbing to me. (Bill)

The parents also made a distinction between real and cartoon/animated violence. There was less concern for animated violence compared to the depiction of real people in violent acts. When referring to animated violence in commercials, a mother of two stated:

Those don't bother me as much as the shooting of real people, you know, with blood that spills everywhere. (Jane)

Thus, the parents' definition of violence seemed to mirror the children's. Aggression and violence are defined by observable blood, gore, and realism. Parents seemed to disregard cartoon or animated violence because they felt their children knew the difference between it and reality. Again, this misalignment with scholarly definitions of violence could produce problems, as prior research demonstrates that media violence does not need to be bloody or realistic to have a negative effect on children (e.g., Anderson et al. 2003). Parents appeared to have a lack of concern for the *intent to harm* as a driving force in violent content. They seem to focus mainly on the *outcome* and the level of depicted injury.

#### *Concern for Violence in Commercials*

Another theme was the *lack* of parental concern with media violence in general and for violence in commercials as well. Parents were more concerned over the influence of the commercials in terms of what the products had to offer than they were over violent depictions in ads. As one father of three states:

I don't think violence in commercials is the problem . . . the fact that it gets all of the advertisers . . . trying to influence them [children]. It's trying to make us think like we're not uncomfortable about what we do and why we do that. You know, you've got to drink a Miller beer or you won't get the girl. I think it's that stuff that's the real problem. (Dwight)

A mother of three also felt that violence was not the biggest issue in advertising:

I don't see violence in commercials as the biggest problem. It is the stuff that you don't notice but that you're still influenced by. (Tracy)

Many parents made the comparison between television shows and movies compared to commercials, stating that commercials were less violent. The level of violence between the media types was evidenced throughout all the groups interviewed. A different mother of three states:

The TV shows are so much more violent than the commercials, I mean that, it's more the sexual stuff, you pick up the violence from the TV shows and it's a lot more extreme than the commercials I think, at least from what I've seen. (Michele)

Parents seemed to feel that if violence did exist in commercials, it was implied, but not actual. This is consistent with their position that aggression is defined by depicted blood. How marketers influence children through adult content, product, and usage situations seemed to be more of an immediate concern.

There was a reoccurring theme related to sexual or adult content in commercials, and this seemed to be of more concern than violence. Several parents mentioned this type of adult content:

I am more tolerant to violence than other forms of problematic issues on television such as provocative issues. (Dave)

I think I get more uncomfortable with sexual innuendos. (Joanne)

Although violence may be in commercials, parents felt they needed to protect their children more from sexual content. Sexual content was viewed as more of an immediate concern to parents when trying to protect their children.

#### *Parents' Ability to Mitigate the Effects of Commercial Violence*

A final theme that emerged was that parents felt that if violence was a problem in the media, they could handle the situation and mitigate its effects. Many of the parents spoke of watching television with their children. By being present, they felt that they could address any problems or concerns that might arise during the programming. Several parents viewed watching television as family time, and by covieing, they could address any problems or concerns as they emerged. In order to educate their children, many parents felt they had talked to their children about the downside of television and what problems could arise. As one father of four states:

I'd stress to my kids that TV, their goal is not necessarily your betterment or your education . . . it is what are they trying to get from you. (Alan)

The parents felt that talking to their children and explaining the influences of television gave their children the knowledge to evaluate problem situations that may occur. By

explaining the problems and pitfalls of commercials specifically, several parents were confident that their children were given the tools to make good decisions and evaluations. As Melinda (mother of two) notes:

We have talked to him about these ads. That's the purpose of them. It's called persuasion. (Melinda)

## OVERALL DISCUSSION OF FOCUS GROUP RESULTS

The focus groups yield four possible conclusions (regarding the focus group participants): (1) parents' and children's definitions of violence are inconsistent with those provided by aggression researchers (e.g., Anderson and Bushman 2001; Bushman and Anderson 2001); (2) parents and children have little, if any, concern with violent content in commercials; (3) parents felt that they could mitigate the effects of media violence if it became a problem; and (4) while mothers and fathers are inconsistent between themselves regarding concern about media violence in general, parents appear to be more troubled with other advertising aspects (such as sexual content) than they are with violence. The focus group data did not appear to suggest that parents have greater concerns about the potential effects of violent content on boys versus girls.

It is important to acknowledge that results of these focus groups should be interpreted with a certain degree of caution. Research techniques such as focus groups are typically used to generate ideas and insights into problems; they should not be used to generalize findings to those individuals who were not participating. Thus, while our focus groups suggested that child and parent concern with commercial violence was not widespread, more quantitative studies should be performed before concluding that this is the case for all.

## EXPERIMENTAL STUDY

Given the findings that parents (in our focus groups) perceive that commercial violence is not a problem, and the results of Shanahan, Hermans, and Hyman (2003) that child-directed commercials contain more violence than similarly targeted programs, we felt it was important to determine whether children *could* be adversely affected by the presence of violent content in television ads. Such a notion is especially important given that the GAM suggests that children are likely to generate aggressive cognitions when exposed to even small doses of violent (versus nonviolent) content in the media. Consistent with the GAM, we hypothesize:

*H1: Children exposed to commercials with violent content are likely to generate more aggressive cognitions than those exposed to similar commercials that are void of violent content.*

There is an additional concern, however, that the presence of commercials paired with violent programming may be even more problematic. That is, violent programs may prime children's violence-based knowledge structures, potentially creating additive effects and eliciting more aggressive cognitions in response to violent commercials (as opposed to when violent commercials are paired with programs that do not contain violent scenes). Such thinking is consistent with the GAM in that violent programs could allow receivers to evoke violent-based knowledge structures that would put them in a mind-set to generate even more aggressive cognitions than they normally would. Thus, we hypothesize:

*H2: Children exposed to both commercials and programs containing violence are likely to generate more aggressive cognitions than those exposed to violent commercials contained in nonviolent programs.*

A recent study noted that boys are more likely to seek out violent media content than are girls (Christakis and Zimmerman 2007). These authors suggest that this may be due to socialization differences (regarding aggression), cultural norms, or genetic dispositions. Extending these results to the case of ad exposure, we expect that boys will be more likely to focus on ads that contain violent content than girls. Given this line of thinking, we hypothesize:

*H3: When exposed to violent content in commercials, boys will generate more aggressive cognitions than girls.*

Finally, based on the focus group data, it appears that both parents and children believe that parental intervention will temper the influence of violent content on kids' behaviors. It is important to note that such an influence is consistent with prior research in consumer socialization that suggests that parents' coviewing of television programs and commercials with their children is an effective means of socializing their offspring to appropriately deal with the media (Carlson and Grossbart 1988; John 1999). Previous research suggests that coviewing allows parents the opportunity to lessen the influence of advertising on children (Carlson, Grossbart, and Walsh 1990). With coviewing, parents and children are provided an opportunity to converse about violence in ads and its possible effects. Thus, coviewing is thought to provide parents with an opportunity to lessen advertising's effects on their children, not just at the time of the conversation but, because it has lasting effects, well into the future as well (Grossbart and Crosby 1984). Thus, we felt that if coviewing regularly occurred in the child's household, the effects of commercial violence could be lessened.

Although our experiment focused on children viewing ads in isolation from their parents, to determine the potential effects of parents' coviewing on children's responses to violent commercials, children were asked about the degree to which they

typically coview television with parents. Given that research has suggested that coviewing will lessen the effects of media on children, we hypothesize:

*H4: When exposed to violent content in commercials, children who are more likely to coview television with their parents will generate fewer aggressive cognitions than those who are less likely to coview.*

## RESEARCH PHASE III: EXPERIMENTAL STUDY

### Method

#### *Experimental Design*

The study used a 2 (experimental ad: nonviolent vs. violent)  $\times$  2 (experimental program: violent vs. nonviolent)  $\times$  2 (sex: girl vs. boy) experimental design. Subjects were *randomly assigned* to one of the four experimental conditions (for the ad and program manipulation—sex obviously was not manipulated). The violent ad featured action figure toys (based on the comic book and movie for the "Fantastic Four"), while the nonviolent ad featured a remote-control car (Rewinder). Both ads were rated to be equal in a pretest of ad likability by subjects similar to (but not the same subjects as) those used in the main experiment. All subjects viewed excerpts of two experimental programs (which featured two shows, one targeted at girls—*Totally Spies*; the other targeted at boys—*GI Joe: Cobra*). Violent and nonviolent program conditions used differing parts of these same programs.

#### *Experimental Stimuli*

To test the hypotheses, eight 9-minute videos were created. All videos followed the format: commercial block 1 (30 seconds—target commercial), program segment 1 (3 minutes), commercial block 2 (30 seconds—cereal commercial), program segment 2 (3 minutes), and commercial block 3 (30 seconds—target commercial repeated). The two program segments included a section of children's shows, one targeted to boys (*GI Joe*) and one targeted toward girls (*Totally Spies*). One segment of each was shown to each child—therefore each child saw one section of a boy-directed show and one of a girl-directed show (in randomized order). The design was 2 (violent show or nonviolent show)  $\times$  2 (violent ad or nonviolent ad). In the nonviolent conditions, children saw two segments of the shows that did not include any aggression; the violent and nonviolent segments were from different parts of the same episodes. Regarding the commercials, there was one filler ad that was seen once, and one target ad that was seen in two of the commercial blocks. The violent ad featured a set of action

figure toys that attempted to harm each other. The nonviolent ad was for a remote-controlled vehicle (and contained no acts of harm). Both ads included age-appropriate (approximately 8- to 12-year-old) male and female actors.

### Subjects

Children (ages 8–12) were recruited from a database of those who expressed interest in participating in research experiments. Graduate students called potential subjects based on their age. Potential participants were contacted in a random order. There were 165 total participants (55% male), each randomly assigned to a condition. For the most part, subjects resided within driving distance of a major Midwestern university (where the experiment was run). All subjects were paid for their participation in the experiment.

### Procedure and Measures

#### Procedures

Subjects were greeted by an experimental assistant as they entered the research laboratory. Both subjects (children) and parents were provided with assent/consent forms and were asked to sign them before proceeding. Upon receiving the signatures, parents were asked to go to a waiting area. Children (subjects) completed a preliminary survey that included their age, media habits (including coviewing of television with their parents), and other general information. Subjects then viewed one of the experimental videos (randomly selected). After viewing the DVD, subjects were presented with another questionnaire, which assessed their violent cognitions and other information (e.g., postexposure ad and brand attitudes). Upon completion of the survey, subjects were debriefed and returned to their parents. At this point, the experimental procedures were explained to waiting parents and (child) subjects paid for their participation.

#### Measures

Consistent with previous research (e.g., Anderson et al. 2004), aggressive cognitions were measured via a word-completion task. Commensurate with their age, participants were presented with a series of four- and five-letter words that contained one or two blanks (for letters that they would formulate to complete a word). For example, children could have completed the word K I \_ \_ as “kill” or “kiss.” The percentage of aggressive words formed from 15 possible words was used as the study’s dependent variable. To address the level of coviewing between parents and the child, a single-item measure, was used: “How often do you watch TV with a parent?” anchored by 1 = “always” and 5 = “never.”

**TABLE 2**  
**Means (and Standard Deviations) per Cell**

Dependent variable = Aggressive cognitions	Program		
	Nonviolent	Violent	Total
<i>Ad</i>			
Nonviolent	1.37 (.83)	1.49 (.90)	1.43 (.86)
Violent	1.53 (.77)	1.57 (.68)	1.55 (.72)
Total	1.45 (.80)	1.53 (.79)	1.49 (.79)

### Results

#### Overall Experimental Results

Means and standard deviations of aggressive cognitions generated by subjects in each experimental condition are reported in Table 2. As can be seen from the means, subjects viewing the violent ad (marginal mean = 1.55) appeared to generate more aggressive cognitions than those viewing the nonviolent ad (marginal mean = 1.43). Also, subjects viewing the violent program appeared to generate more violent cognitions (mean = 1.53) than those viewing the nonviolent program (mean = 1.45). Hypothesis test results are reported below.

#### Main Regression Results

H1–H3 were tested via dummy variable regression (with the percentage of aggressive cognitions serving as the dependent variable, and exposure to the violent ad [0 = not exposed; 1 = exposed], exposure to the violent program [0 = not exposed; 1 = exposed], and sex [0 = girl; 1 = boy] used as the independent variables). Results are reported in Table 3. Exposure to the violent ad ( $\beta_{\text{violent ad}} = .059; p < .05$ ) and sex ( $\beta_{\text{sex}} = -.088; p < .01$ ), but not exposure to the violent program ( $\beta_{\text{violent program}} = .038; p > .10$ ), were significant indicators of the percentage of aggressive cognitions developed by participants. *All interactions (both two- and three-way) were not significant.* Thus, exposure to the violent ad increased the percentage of aggressive words generated by subjects, supporting H1. However, contrary to expectations, the regression results did not support H2, although they were in the predicted direction. Specifically, exposure to both commercials and programs containing violence did not result in the generation of more aggressive cognitions as compared to exposure to violent commercials paired with nonviolent programs. It is possible that this effect was not observed since parents might have

**TABLE 3**  
Regression Results

Dependent variable = Aggressive cognitions  
 $R^2 = .105$  ( $F = 6.293$ ;  $df = 3, 161$ ;  $p < .001$ )

Independent variable	Coefficient (SE)
Constant	.361
Violent ad	.059** (.026)
Violent program	.038 (.026)
Sex	-.088* (.026)

Note: SE = standard error.

\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*  $p < .05$ .

previously expressed concerns with violence in programs—children might have been more vigilant to the potential consequences of violent programs. Finally, the main effect for sex only shows that boys have a stronger tendency to have violent cognitions but says nothing about the role of the commercial. Since the ad  $\times$  sex interaction is not significant, no support was provided for H3.

H4 was tested via regression analysis (see Table 4). Participants' self-reported coviewing of television and the significant independent variables from the first regression equation (reported above) were used as the independent variables in this analysis. As expected, coviewing was negatively related to the percentage of aggressive words generated in response to the stimuli ( $\beta_{\text{coviewing}} = -.051$ ;  $p < .01$ ), after controlling for violent ad condition and sex, providing support for H4. No significant interaction terms were observed.

### Discussion for Experimental Results

Results of the experiment suggest that children are susceptible to the negative influences of violence contained in television commercials. Children (regardless of their gender and the nature of the surrounding television program) generated more aggressive cognitions when exposed to commercials that contained violent content when compared to those who viewed television ads with no violent content. Although boys generated more violent cognitions than did girls, all participants generated more aggressive cognitions after viewing commercials with violent content (compared to those who viewed non-violent ads). Thus, one may argue that violence in commercials has the potential to contribute to all children's development and reinforcement of knowledge structures regarding violence, regardless of their sex. This is consistent with other recent

**TABLE 4**  
Regression Results

Dependent variable = Aggressive cognitions  
 $R^2 = .137$  ( $F = 8.439$ ;  $df = 3, 161$ ;  $p < .001$ )

Independent variable	Coefficient (SE)
Constant	.235
Violent ad	.056** (.025)
Sex	-.088* (.025)
Coviewing	-.051* (.017)

Note: SE = standard error.

\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*  $p < .05$ .

studies that have attempted to find interactions with child sex (e.g., Anderson, Gentile, and Buckley 2007).

It is interesting to note that given that parents participating in the focus groups appeared to have little concern with violence in commercials and expressed confidence in their ability to mediate its potentially negative effects on children, the results do support the notion that coviewing may help them accomplish this objective. Results of our experiment suggested that children of parents who regularly coview television generated less aggressive cognitions than those who came from households where mothers and fathers tended not to engage in this activity.

### GENERAL DISCUSSION

Previous research suggested that a surprising number of ads targeted at children contain some type of violent content. This finding is particularly important as one considers the multitude of ads targeted at children. For example, prior to the deregulation of advertising to children in 1983, approximately \$100 million was spent annually on such ads; in 2006, this amount was estimated to be \$17 billion (Linn 2006). Thus, even a small percentage of ads containing violent themes or images could influence millions of children. Given that prior research has established a strong link between children's exposure to media violence and aggressive cognitions, feelings, and behaviors, there is potential for child-directed ads to contribute to this important societal issue. The present research, which reports on several empirical investigations, attempted to shed light on potential concerns that might emerge as children are exposed to violent television ads.

Results of the studies reported here paint a picture suggesting that violence in commercials targeted at children may pose

a problem. Specifically, in the focus groups, parents expressed little concern with the effects of violent commercials on their children (parallel focus groups with children mirrored this lack of concern). Yet results of an experiment determined that exposure to ads containing violent content clearly increased the amount of violent cognitions that were generated by children. Thus, parents' lack of concern does not seem to be warranted—children may be affected by exposure to violence in commercials. As noted in the GAM (Anderson and Bushman 2002), the generation of violent cognitions may start a process whereby children reinforce aggressive knowledge structures and, as a result, may be more likely to engage in aggressive acts (as a result of viewing violent television ads). Repeated activation of aggressive knowledge structures (via the generation of violent cognitions in response to violent content in commercials) becomes more automatic with repetition and eventually may become a part of a child's personality, providing him or her with the potential to act more aggressively in some instances. Thus, there is potential that repeated exposure to commercials containing violence may lead children to act more aggressively than they would have otherwise.

One of the major motivations for our undertaking of this research centered on the CARU's guideline regarding the promotion of prosocial behaviors in ads targeted at children. Given that children appear to have the potential to generate more aggressive cognitions after exposure to violent ads, we feel it may be appropriate to strengthen the guidelines. Specifically, we recommend that the guidelines ask that advertisers refrain from including violent or aggressive content in ads directed at children (with violence defined as characters engaging in or threatening intentional harm to other characters).

Although we expected that there may be evidence of sex differences in the generation of aggression cognitions in response to violent ads, it was not observed in the present study. Boys generated more aggressive cognitions than did girls for all ads, yet they did not do so specifically for those containing violent content. These results suggest that the effects of media violence are not a problem that is unique to boys. Thus, public policy or self-regulatory efforts aimed at reducing the number or impact of ads containing violent contents needs to be enacted with respect to all children (not just boys).

Finally, results of the experimental study suggested that children who typically coview television with their parents are less likely to generate aggressive cognitions after exposure to violent ads. This finding is consistent with the notion suggested by Carlson and Grossbart (1988) that coviewing is an effective means of socializing children about the potentially harmful effects of advertising on children. Thus, results suggest that parents can lessen the potentially harmful effects of violent commercial content on their children via coviewing and discussion. However, such a conclusion should be interpreted with a degree of caution; focus group results suggested that

parents had little understanding of what constitutes violence in ads. As a result, although it appears that coviewing and discussion (by parents with their children) of ads that contain obvious violence may mitigate potentially harmful effects, this may not occur. Given their lack of understanding of what constitutes aggression and violence, parents may not be as likely to note its presence in ads and, thus, would not be motivated to engage in discussions with their children. Moreover, it is important to note that our measure of parental coviewing may have been overly simplistic. Thus, it may not have captured the depth of this important concept.

Because parents play such a pivotal role in how media and advertising consumption affect children, additional research dealing with this topic is needed. While the present study investigated the influence of only a single behavior (coviewing) in attempting to better understand how parental involvement may mitigate the effects of media on children, recent research has identified three additional aspects of parental involvement that may be used to mediate media effects: limit setting on amount of time, limit setting on media content, and active mediation (where parents discuss media thoughtfully with children). Focusing on the present study, it is possible that our measure of coviewing served as a proxy for all of these aspects. Future research is needed to study each aspect separately, however, as it appears that active parental mediation rather than simply coviewing may be effective in mitigating the potential detrimental effects of media on children (Buijzen 2009; Buijzen and Valkenburg 2005; Nathanson 1999, 2002; Nikken and Jansz 2006). Nonetheless, the results of the present study and past research suggest that a potential fruitful avenue for public policy action would be to focus on parents and help them to understand their pivotal role in moderating the effects of violent media content on their children (Gentile, Saleem, and Anderson 2007).

## STUDY LIMITATIONS

As with all empirical investigations, the present study had limitations (most of which can be addressed in future research studies). All data gathered (in both the focus groups and the experiment study) were gathered with subjects who resided in or near a single city in the Midwestern United States. Thus, as is the case with any empirical study, the generalizability of the results could be questioned. Certainly, results should be replicated in other parts of the country with more economically and socially diverse samples. For the experiment, results were generated from a set of two commercials that were embedded in two differing scenes from two animated television programs. Thus, results could differ for other ads (that feature different products) and other programs. Moreover, it is important to note that results were based on subjects' exposure to television commercials in a lab setting, and results are based

on children's generation of aggressive cognitions (and not actual behaviors). Finally, since parental coviewing was not manipulated in the experiment, it is important to note that alternative explanations (other than those posed in H4) may not be ruled out. For example, it may be that the group of children who indicated that they coviewed with their parents more simply watched less television and were therefore exposed to less violence in the past. Thus, the generation of less-violent cognitions might be due to their having less well-developed violence-based cognitive structures. As a result of these limitations, future research regarding this important issue is needed before definitive public policy or self-regulatory actions could be recommended.

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