

**Violent Advertising on Canadian Primetime Television:  
A Frequency Analysis and Potential Impact**

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**ABSTRACT**

Despite growing concerns about the prevalence and potential consequences of violent content in the media, there have been surprisingly few studies about violent content in advertising. Because advertising is designed to be memorable and persuasive, there is reason to believe that violent content in this format may have more pronounced effects on viewers than violent content in regular programming. As a first step towards research in this area, we report the results of a frequency analysis of violent ads on Canadian primetime television revealing that approximately 13% of the ads have violent content. In addition, we suggest possible effects of violent content at both the brand and the viewer level with reference to three extant theories in the communications field.

**Introduction**

Some advertising, like the programming in which it is embedded, contains violent content. Little is known about the frequency of violent portrayals in advertising in Canada or the consequences on viewers and society of such portrayals. This paper is written as a call for further research into this important topic. Without empirical evidence about the effects of violent advertising, policy makers face a void when considering appropriate regulations, practitioners cannot understand the consequences of their portrayals, and researchers cannot build an understanding of the phenomenon.

As a 2007 Health Canada report indicated, societal concern about violence has been growing (*Violence and Abuse*, 2007). The report states, “Violence occurs in various contexts, including homes, schools, neighbourhoods and communities, regardless of age, gender, sexual orientation, class, ethnic background, religious or spiritual group membership, physical and mental ability or place of residence” (p. 1). Other examples of the growing concern with violence include the Canadian Initiative on Workplace Violence that has been founded to conduct research aimed at preventing violence at work. A recent study of road rage found that just over 20 percent of Canadians had been victims of road rage (*A Study on Road Rage*, 2001). Guns and violence became an election issue in 2006 following public outcry about the unintentional shooting death of a teenager in downtown Toronto (Munroe, 2006). Statistics Canada reports that the overall five-year rate of spousal violence has remained unchanged at 7 percent since 1999 (*Family Violence in Canada: A statistical profile*, 2005).

Media both reflects and shapes societal trends and people’s perceptions (Holbrook, 1987; Pollay, 1986). For decades a debate has raged about whether media violence causes violence in viewers. For example, Huesmann and colleagues argue that there is fifty years of evidence showing linkages between exposure to media violence and aggressive behavior, and that children's viewing of violent TV shows, their identification with aggressive same-sex TV characters, and their perceptions that TV violence is realistic are all linked to later aggression as young adults, for both males and females (L. Rowell Huesmann, Moise-Titus, Podolski, & Eron, 2003). In contrast, Jonathan Freedman of the University of Toronto, states "the scientific evidence simply does not show that watching violence either produces violence in people, or desensitizes them to

it” (Freedman, 2002). For example, in a study of programming from 1993 to 2001 (excluding cartoons) on six major Canadian television networks, Laval University professors Guy Paquette and Jacques de Guise found that incidents of physical violence increased by 378 per cent, and that TV shows in 2001 averaged 40 acts of violence per hour (Paquette, Gosselin, & DeGuise, 1997). A 2005 article in *AboutKidsHealth* News, points the finger at violent advertising, not just programming as a cause for concern stating: “A surprising number of commercials that air during major sporting events contain violent or risky behavior—even at times when children are probably watching”(Watch those commercial breaks, 2005). Yet when it came to providing evidence to support this claim, the article only cites information from studies conducted in the United States, a country with much less stringent advertising regulation and industry self-regulation. The lack of Canadian statistics on violence in advertising hinders social advocates and policy makers alike.

To control advertising, Canada uses a combination of regulatory and industry self-regulatory frameworks. There are strict codes and regulations for some classes of advertising such as political advertising, the advertising of alcoholic beverages, and prescription drugs. There are also strict regulations such as the Broadcast Code for Advertising to Children and the Quebec Consumer Protection Act which prohibits television advertising directed to Quebec children under the age of 13. There is also the requirement that the content of all children’s advertisements be pre-cleared before they are aired. In addition to the formal regulatory framework, Advertising Standards Canada and La Fondation Canadienne de la Publicité (FCP) advocate industry self-regulation. These organizations establish the standards and codes to guide advertising practice and

manage the complaint driven system whereby advertisements are withdrawn if they are found to be in violation of the codes and standards. The Canadian self-regulatory system, especially its standards of responsible advertising to children “is often referenced as the standard by which other countries are measured, and is cited frequently by such international groups as the World Health Organization” (*Advertising to Children in Canada: A Reference Guide*, 2006).

Despite the concern in Canada and other countries around the world about the potential harm caused by violent advertisements, there are surprisingly few studies on this topic. Without data on the prevalence of violence in advertising, policy makers and social advocates alike are hamstrung with regard to understanding, controlling, or advocating action to address this issue. The purpose of this paper is to address this knowledge gap and to provide a foundation for policy development and social advocacy. In the final sections of the paper, we develop four propositions to guide future research. We also raise other issues related to violent content in advertising that merit empirical investigation. In designing our research, we worked to address two primary questions: (1) How prevalent is violent advertising on Canadian television? (2) What are the possible consequences of exposure to violent advertisements? To answer the prevalence question, we report the results of a frequency analysis of violent advertising on Canadian primetime television. To examine the potential consequences of advertising with violent content, we propose several brand-level and viewer-level effects of exposure to violent advertising grounded in three extant communication theories: information processing theory, social learning theory, and cultivation theory.

The paper begins with a review of the literature on violence and violence in the media in general. Next, we present the results of the frequency analysis of violent advertisements on Canadian primetime television. We then present a discussion of the possible consequences of viewer exposure to violent advertisements and conclude the paper with directions for further research.

## **Literature Review**

### ***What is Violence?***

Before conducting our frequency analysis, it was essential to clearly define what constitutes violent content. Although definitions of violence vary somewhat in the extant literature, there are several key themes in the definitions (Bushman & Anderson, 2001; Tabburro, Gordon, D'Apolito, & Howard, 2004). First, violence is defined as an action or behavior. Some (e.g., Tabburro et al., 2004), limit the action to any intentional physical contact. The target of violence may be a person, a group of people, a person belonging to a specific organization or it may be organization itself. Animals and inanimate objects may also be the targets of violence. The role of the focal characters involved in violent action was sometimes defined. For example, Tamburro et al., (Tabburro et al., 2004) talk of actions by an aggressor.

The literature is consistent in portraying the consequence of the violent action as harm (such as a physical injury), or a legitimate threat of harm. The harm resulting from the violent action may be direct or indirect. If the violence is direct, there is an intended victim who is targeted directly. In cases of indirect violence, the harm occurs through a third party or the harm is directed at a possession which in turn indirectly harms a focal person.

Much of the literature focused on media violence drew on studies of violence in the workplace. Thus, as in the workplace violence literature, the literature on media violence also suggests that there is a tremendous range and variety of acts or behaviours that constitute violence. In a fashion similar to the workplace violence literature, the media violence literature also presents taxonomies and classifications of various violent actions (see (Baron, 1993p. 3; Baron, Neuman, & Geddes, 1999; Robinson & Bennett, 1995). For example, violent acts have been classified as physical behaviours (for example punching or damaging property) or psychological and verbal behaviours (for example hurling verbal insults or ignoring the target). Violence can be active or passive (in other words, it can occur through initiating a violent action or withholding a helpful action). Violent acts have also been classified as overt or covert (that is, the action comes from an obvious source or it can be an anonymous act of aggression). Additionally, acts have been classified as such as direct psychological harm (for example verbal insults or ignoring the victim), or indirect harm (for example destroying the victim's property or spreading rumors).

We worked to synthesize this work, and for the purposes of our frequency analysis we defined advertisements with violent content as those advertisements that contain any implied or explicit *behaviour* that is performed by one individual or group of individuals with the *intent* of causing direct or indirect harm - either physical or psychological - to a *target* (another human, animal or object such as a possession or property) (Jones & Cunningham, 2008). The specification of 'harm' in our definition separates violence from other forms of counterproductive behaviour such as acts of incivility (Pearson, Andersson, & Porath, 2000). The specification of 'intent' separates

violence from other forms of ad executions that may cause negative affect (for example, a child with a sad face). We used the literature that provided classifications of violent content as a guide to the types of actions or behaviours to look for in our sample.

### ***Violence in the Media***

Despite the lack of focus on violent content in advertising, media violence has long been an area of concern, and research in this field, such as Smith's 1952 study of violent content in television programming, dates back to the early 1950s (Valeria Smith, 2002). Concern with the frequency of violence in the media is not new. The National Television Violence Study, a content analysis of over 8,000 hours of American broadcast and cable television, found that over 60 percent of the programming aired in the United States contained violence (*The National Television Violence Study*, 1998).

Subsequent studies suggested that the amount of violence on television remained unchanged throughout the 1970s and 1980s (Gerbner & Signorielli, 1990). A more recent content analysis showed violence to be present in both Canadian and American television programming (Gosselin, DeGuise, Pacquette, & Benoit, 1997). On average, Canadians witness about 18 instances of violence per hour of television programming (Gosselin et al., 1997). This level of violent content is only marginally smaller than that reported in the United States. As a 1995 report by the Department of Canadian Heritage on television violence described why violence is a concern. Although the report ignores violence in advertising, we propose that its contentions are highly applicable to advertising violence as well:

Because television violence is accompanied by vivid production features, preschoolers are predisposed to seek out and pay attention to violence—particularly cartoon violence. It is not the violence itself that makes the cartoons

attractive to preschoolers, but the accompanying vivid production features. (Josephson, 1995)

The purpose of many of the studies of media violence was to ascertain whether or not there was a correlation between viewing violent programming and subsequent violent behaviour or intentions of violent behavior, especially among children and youth. Despite a long history of research focused on this question, results have been equivocal. While some media effects scholars (Paik & Comstock, 1994; Wilson et al., 1997) suggest that exposure to violent content in the media results in increases in violent behavior, others (Freedman, 2002) have criticized these studies for definitional and methodological deficiencies and have concluded that there is not a clear relationship between violent content and subsequent violent behaviour. Nonetheless, Villani (2001) made the point that the studies linking television violence to subsequent violent youth behaviour in the 1970s and 1980s were done with material that was not as violent as it is today. Currently, children are exposed to more graphic media content at younger ages.

Although most concerns about media violence, both domestic and international, have focused on movies, television dramas and cartoons, concern for the violence that is contained in advertising does exist. Shanahan et al., for example, (2003) found that the average rate of violence per minute in a sample of 1110 minutes of American children's television programming was 3.46 acts of violence per minute of commercials and 2.65 acts of violence per minute of programming. Another group of researchers noted that violence is increasingly being used as a major executional element within sport-related advertising (Jackson, 1997a 1997b; 1998; Jackson and Andrews, 1998). Anderson (1997) found that approximately 7 percent of the advertisements in the 1996 Major League Baseball Playoffs contained violent content.

Tamburro et al., 2004, expressed concern that children watch a significant amount of sports related programming even if it is not directly aimed at this audience. They studied 1185 commercials that aired in conjunction with top-rated American sports programs. They found that 14 percent displayed unsafe behaviour, 6 percent depicted violence, and that 49 percent of the commercial breaks (a series of commercials shown as a set during a commercial break) had at least one commercial depicting unsafe or violent behaviour. They also found that sports programs varied with regard to the amount of unsafe or violent commercials aired. The Super Bowl had the highest number of advertisements with violent or unsafe content while the Masters Golf Tournament had no such ads. While violent content has become an accepted form of advertising in many countries, others are challenging and resisting the trend towards violence in advertising. For example, New Zealand has banned a number of sport-related advertisements over the past few years because of their excessive levels of violence.

Violence that is part of both programming and commercials is a subject of great concern for Canadians. In the early 1990s, a petition was signed by 100,000 people. This led to the development of a code of ethics regarding violence on television in 1994 (Gosselin et al., 1997). The following quotation captures the emotional involvement one Canadian has with this issue:

*Over the past eleven years, I have utilized most of the Canadian legislative and regulatory avenues available in an effort to stem the tide of brutality that infects every segment of popular culture. Initiatives have included everything from filing complaints with the Ontario Human Rights Commission, using the federal Criminal Code obscenity and hate propaganda laws, organizing advertiser boycotts of violent television programs, filing countless ignored briefs with the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission, and organizing a forum to examine the use of civil lawsuits against entertainment companies (Valerie Smith, 2002).*

Despite the concern with violent content in advertising and the emotional reaction it causes on the part of some stakeholders, surprising little research has been devoted to advertising with violent content. For example, even when the Canadian Media Awareness Network (an association born in 1994 to address the issue of media violence) developed its 1989 to 2000 chronology of media violence, it failed to include violence in advertising as an area of concern (*Media Violence Chronology 1989 - 2000*). The only allusions to advertising in the chronology were the 1993 Federal Government guideline forbidding the placement of government advertising in conjunction with programming that contained scenes of gratuitous violence or explicit sex, and the 1993 Institute of Canadian Advertising recommendation that its member agencies assess television shows for violent content when evaluating their television buys.

As described earlier in the literature review, Canada's advertisers rely on a complaint driven, self-regulatory system to control a large proportion of advertising content. In the period 2000 to 2006, the Advertising Standards Council of Canada received 9099 complaints about advertisements, and each year during this period the greatest number of complaints fell under "Clause 14: Unacceptable Depictions and Portrayals," which are advertisements that show depictions of violent or aggressive behaviour as part of advertising message especially if models depicted or ads were aimed at young people. In 2006, 61 percent of the complaints investigated fell in this category. The category also includes advertising that depicts, sex or sexual innuendo, ads that portray lying, cheating, infidelity, or disrespect for society's rituals, and ads that are deemed 'gross' or distasteful (ASC, 2006). The concern with violent advertising content is estimated to be even higher, however, since the total number of complaints received by

the Council accounts for only a small percentage of all advertising complaints. Most complaints are directed at the television station that airs the advertisement rather than to the council. One Canadian television station reported that between 3,000 and 5,000 complaints are received each year from consumers and that complaints are rarely forwarded to the Advertising Standards Council<sup>1</sup>.

Given the neglect of advertising with violent content in the literature and in the Canadian context, it is the purpose of our study to provide a foundation for further research in this area. In the next section, we present arguments about why this is such an important area for on-going investigation.

### ***Why Advertisements with Violent Content Deserve Investigation***

Unlike programming that is designed to entertain, advertisements, by their very nature, are designed to be memorable and to persuade. The process by which advertising works was described by Petty, Cacioppo and Schuman (Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983) in their Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). The ELM model postulates two distinct routes to attitude change. The central, or systematic route, is the one taken when a viewer is highly involved with the product. Changes in beliefs and attitudes occur as a result of the individual diligently processing the product attribute information in the ad. The viewer largely ignores other advertising elements and peripheral cues. Peripheral processing, in contrast, occurs when the viewer exhibits low involvement with the product and experiences an attitude change, not from processing the product information in the ad, but as a result of associating the product with other important cues such as the support of a celebrity.

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<sup>1</sup> Personal communication with K. Closs, Traffic, CJOH Television, Ottawa, ON.

We contend that in today's media intensive and cluttered, highly competitive advertising environment, peripheral processing is increasingly the norm. Violent content may be an important cue driving attention to the ad and peripheral processing of the product or service information. If this contention is correct, then violent content in advertising may have a profound impact on attitudes and behaviours. This effect would occur because consumers are not as cognitively engaged when processing the ad information nor may they employ counter arguing against violent content, imagery and messages. Furthermore, as other research has shown, behaviours depicted in ads are often put forth as something to aspire to or be emulated by a target consumer. Advertising uses the sophisticated production techniques that have been noted to affect children and draw them into violent television programming. We propose, therefore, that the effects of violent content in advertising may be more consequential than violent content in television programming.

The above contentions are supported by studies that have examined the impact of other potentially negative advertising content on the attitudes and subsequent behaviours of children and adolescents such as tobacco promotions and later susceptibility to smoking (Altman, Levine, Coeytaux, Slade, & Jaffe, 1996; Pierce, Choi, Gilpin, Farkas, & Berry, 1998). Research also shows a strong relationship between exposure to alcohol advertising and drinking beliefs and behaviours (Grube & Wallack, 1994). Given that advertising does have a strong influence in shaping some beliefs and behaviours related to certain products, it is possible that advertising containing violence also influences subsequent beliefs and behaviours related to violence.

### ***The Prevalence of Violent Ads in Canada***

One goal for this research is to report the frequency and content of violent advertisements on Canadian television. In doing so, we aim to address the following questions:

1. What is the frequency of violent advertisements on Canadian primetime television?
2. Does the frequency of violent advertisements vary by:
  - i. type of channel (for example local versus national channel; sports versus regular programming)?
  - ii. type of advertisement (for example, product/service advertisement, advertisement for upcoming program, advertisement for a movie)?
  - iii. type of violence (for example, physical, psychological, or sexual violence)?
  - iv. target of the violence (for example, a person, beast, or object)?

To ascertain the prevalence of violent advertisements on Canadian television, a frequency analysis was undertaken. Two hundred hours of television programming were recorded over a two week period during the summer of 2006. The first 100 hours of television programming were recorded during the first week in June. The second 100 hours were recorded during the second week in July. All 200 hours consisted of weekday, prime-time television programming (programming aired during the 7:00 pm – 11:00 pm EST time slots) on five different channels (CBC, CTV, Global, TSN, and CHCH). We chose prime-time television in order to examine the prevalence of violent advertisements during the period that has the highest number of viewers. The five channels were chosen in order to represent the range of television programming available in Canada. Thus we included the three major networks (CBC, CTV, and Global), one specialty channel (TSN), and one local, but affiliated channel (CHCH – Hamilton). During the 200 hours of programming, a total of 7717 advertisements were aired. These

advertisements formed our sample. Of this total, there were 232 unique advertisements that were repeated various times.

Two independent raters assessed each of the advertisements using the definition of violence provided earlier in this manuscript. The raters were undergraduate students, one male and one female, from two separate fields (marketing and education). The raters were trained by assessing a sample of 20 video advertisements selected from the website [www.adcritic.com](http://www.adcritic.com). The raters worked independently to rate each of the advertisements as to whether or not they contained violent content. They also recorded the length of the advertisement, the date of the advertisement, the time period in which the advertisement occurred, the brand/sponsor of the advertisement, and the channel on which it appeared.

Disagreements between the two raters were reconciled by a third, independent rater – an undergraduate student studying Sociology. The final sample of violent advertisements (n=992) were extracted from the television programs and presented to another two raters – both undergraduate students in marketing. These raters coded each of the violent advertisements according to: the type of violence (physical or non-physical); type of advertisement (product/service, upcoming program, movie); victim of the violence (beast, person, object); the number of violent acts in the advertisement; and whether or not the advertisement was repeated in the sample. The two raters were trained using a sample of ten violent advertisements extracted from [www.adcritic.com](http://www.adcritic.com).

In the next section, we describe the results of the frequency analysis. We first describe the frequency and proportion of ads with violent content, and then we examine issues associated with channel, time of day, product type, and types of violence.

## Results

As noted above, our full sample consisted of 7717 advertisements. The two-person rating panel assessed each of the advertisements according to whether or not they contained violence. There was 90 percent agreement between the two raters (disagreements 738/7717 ads). The disagreements were reconciled by a third party. Using this system, we found that the sample contained 992 violent advertisements. This represents 12.85 percent of the advertisements shown during the primetime television programming.

Table 1 presents the frequency of violent advertisements by channel. There was some variation across the television channels. Somewhat surprisingly, CBC had the highest frequency of violent ads at 15.91 percent. This compared to CHCH (a local Global affiliate) having the lowest frequency at 11.17 percent. Across all five channels, the proportions of violent-to-non-violent advertisements were not significantly different ( $\chi^2(4) = 6.65, p=.15$ ). Pairwise comparisons of the proportion of violent ads by channel did indicate significant differences between the top-two channels in terms of frequency of violent content (CBC and TSN) versus the bottom three (CTV, Global, CHCH) ( $z=4.01, p<.05$ ).

**Table 1**  
Frequency of Violent Advertisements on Canadian Television Channels

Channel	Non-Violent	Violent	Total
CBC	1073 84.09%	203 15.91%	1276
CHCH	1583 88.83%	199 11.17%	1782
CTV	1403 88.13%	189 11.87%	1592
Global	1609 87.73%	225 12.27%	1834

TSN	1057	176	1233
	85.73%	14.27%	
TOTAL	6725	992	7717
	87.15%	12.85%	

Note: 232 of the ads were unique, the rest were repeats from within this group of ads

Table 2 contains information pertaining to the prevalence of violent advertising by time of day. The proportion of violent advertisements to total advertisements during the times periods was not significantly different ( $\chi^2(7) = .99, p=.99$ ) confirming that the distribution of violent advertisements in prime time is not dependent on the time period. The period 10:00 pm to 10:30 pm had a lower frequency of violent ads than the other time periods. This time period also represents the lowest frequency of total ads. There were fewer ads during this period, because this is typically when the national news broadcasts are aired. CBC, for example, airs very few advertisements during this period.

**Table 2**  
Frequency of Violent Advertisements by Time

Time	Non-Violent	Violent Ads	Total
7:00 PM	1000 88.73%	127 11.27%	1127
7:30 PM	967 89.21%	117 10.79%	1084
8:00 PM	750 86.71%	115 13.29%	865
8:30 PM	845 86.05%	137 13.95%	982
9:00 PM	761 85.51%	129 14.49%	890
9:30 PM	895 86.22%	143 13.78%	1038
10:00 PM	673 87.74%	94 12.26%	767
10:30 PM	834 86.51%	130 13.49%	964
Total	6725	992	7717

Table 3 reports the frequency of violent advertisements by ad type. Advertisements were classified according to the sponsor of the ad. Advertisements coded as 'product/service' advertisements were brands such as Tylenol, Labatt, Dairy Queen, and McDonalds. Advertisements coded as 'upcoming programs' promoted television

shows that were going to be aired on the same channel or network (for example, an advertisement announcing that a CFL game would be aired on CBC). Advertisements coded as “movies” promoted films currently playing in movie theatres (versus those aired on television). There was no difference between the number of violent ads reported for upcoming programs and the number reported for the combination of products/services and movies ( $z=.99$ ,  $p=.71$ ). Since advertisements for movies and products/services tend to be repeated more often, this difference was significant when the frequency of advertising was taken into account ( $z= 9.05$ ,  $p\sim 1.0$ ).

**Table 3**  
Frequency of Violent Advertisements by Type of Advertisement

Ad Type	All Advertisements		Unique Ads Only	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Movie	153	15.42%	42	18.10%
Product/Service	444	44.76%	77	33.19%
Upcoming Program	395	39.82%	113	48.71%
Total	992		232	

To examine the types of violence depicted in each of the ads, our second panel of raters examined each of the advertisements and identified the number of violent acts present in each. A violent act was characterized as one episode of violence. For example, a fight between two individuals was classified as one act even though this fight may have involved several violent behaviours (for example, many punches or many kicks). Over the total sample of violent advertisements ( $n=992$ ), 1076 violent acts were identified. Table 4 contains the classification of these violent acts according to the type of violence (physical, sexual, threat, or degradation) and the victim of the act (person, beast, or object). The majority of the violent acts were physical altercations where the victim was a person.

**Table 4**  
Frequency of Type of Violence and Victim of Violence

Victim	Type of Violence				Total
	Degradation	Physical	Sexual	Threat	
Beast	4	50			54
Object		383		1	384
Person	13	607	6	112	738
Total	17	1040	6	113	1176

In summary, the frequency of violent advertisements on cable television is consistent across channels and across time periods during primetime viewing. Violent content is more prevalent in ads devoted to products/services or movies, but only because these ads appear more often. Approximately 13 percent of the advertisements on Canadian primetime television contain violent content and the majority of this content involves physical, interpersonal violence. The consequences of exposure to such content are discussed in the next section.

### **The Consequences of Viewing Violent Advertisements**

#### ***Propositions to Guide Future Research***

Our aim in this section is to provide directions for future research into the issue of advertising with violent content. We develop four propositions with regard to the potential consequences of viewing violent advertisements. To develop these propositions, we employed three extant theories used in psychology and communications research. First, information processing theory was used. The role of attention, along with issues of involvement as outlined in the Elaboration Likelihood Model, provides the background for propositions regarding brand-level communication effects of exposure to violent

advertisements. Next, social learning theory and cultivation theory provide the basis for propositions regarding viewer-level effects. We propose that the consequences of viewing violent advertisements are manifested in four consumer responses: brand/issue awareness; violent intentions; tolerance for violence; and mean-world perceptions (that is, consumers' perceptions of the abundance of violence in society).

### ***Brand-Level Communication Effects of Exposure to Advertisements With Violent Content***

One reason for the use of violent advertisements may be to increase viewers' attention to the stimulus (advertisement) thereby enhancing attention and brand/issue awareness. For marketing communications to be effective, information processing models specify that consumers must focus on and consider the message contained within the communication (MacInnis & Jaworski, 1989; Petty et al., 1983; Rossiter & Percy, 1997). Since consumers attend to only a small fraction of marketing communications stimuli (Hirschman & Thompson, 1997), advertising creators place tremendous emphasis on peripheral cues which act as attention-getting elements, such as the violent content of an ad.

The use of violent content can increase a consumer's attention to the advertisement in two ways. First, violent content can be considered an intense stimulus (that is, a sensory contrast). Since this type of stimulus is difficult for consumers to avoid, it leads to both voluntary or non-voluntary attention (Rossiter & Percy, 1997). Second, violent content may appeal to some viewers' cognitive or hedonic needs thus enhancing processing of the advertisement's central message (Gelb & Zinkhan, 1986; Petty et al., 1983). Thus, one intended consequence of violent content in advertising

would be to increase brand or issue awareness by enhancing consumers' attention to and/or subsequent processing of the advertisement.

*Proposition 1: A viewer's exposure to an advertisement that contains violent content will result in higher brand awareness than when the viewer is exposed to an advertisement for a similar brand without violent content.*

From the discussion above, it would appear that the use of violent content in advertisements has a positive effect for the ad sponsor (i.e., increased brand/issue awareness). However, many agree that exposure to violent content may have negative social consequences. There seems to be two predominant theoretical bases for the study of exposure to violence and its social consequences: social learning theory and cultivation theory. These two theories provide direction for proposing these negative social consequences.

### ***Viewer-level effects of advertising with violent content.***

Social learning theory contends that humans learn behaviours. It refutes contentions that humans are innately violent or that frustration automatically leads to violence (Bandura, 1977, 1986). Based on social learning theory, violent behavior is learned in two basic ways: (1) from observing violent models and (2) from receiving and/or expecting payoffs following acts of violence.

Bandura (1973) demonstrated that one could learn to be violent by merely viewing a short film (for example, an advertisement) that shows violence as an acceptable response to a situation. So, for example, an individual does not have to have hostile parents or be subjected to noticeable frustration prior to becoming violent. One can just view violent behaviour, presumably on television or in other media forms such as advertising, and then re-enact the viewed behaviour. Social learning theory has been the foundation of many studies of the impact of television on society. Both experimental and

correlation research exists to suggest that a high content of violence on television, either within programs or advertisements, can influence behaviour (Caprara et al., 1987; Eron, Huesmann, Lefkowitz, & Walder, 1972; Kremar & Greene, 1999; NIMH, 1982; Paik & Comstock, 1994; Wilson et al., 1997; Wood, Wong, & Chachere, 1991). Based on this research, the following proposition is presented.

*Proposition 2: Exposure to violent advertisements increases viewers' acceptance of violence as a behavioural norm.*

The second part of social learning theory suggests that violent behaviour is learned when it is positively reinforced or not punished. There is no doubt that the use of violence has some positive payoffs. Parents who raise their voice and threaten punishment often get results in the form of desired behaviour. Viewers of violence in advertisements may learn this behaviour if positive payoffs are depicted in the advertisement (for example, if the strong but violent man wins the woman). The implication drawn from many popular television shows is that violence is acceptable if it results in a desirable outcome (Derlega & Janda, 1981).

In a study by the Center for Media and Public Affairs, the appearance of violence was examined in 573 television programs, television movies, music videos, and Hollywood films. The study showed that almost 40 percent of violent incidents are initiated by "good" characters, and the negative consequences of violence are shown in only 15 percent of programs. This study provides some insight into why violence in the media tends to be imitated. In studies undertaken by Drabman and Thomas (1974; 1975) suggest that individuals tolerate violence more after seeing violence. They found, for example, that peoples' ability to tolerate a fight was higher after watching a violent

movie. Based on this research, it is proposed that exposure to violent content in advertisements may lead to higher acceptance or tolerance of violent behaviour.

*Proposition 3: Exposure to advertising with violent content increases viewers' tolerance of violence.*

The presence of such content in advertising may also affect consumers' perceptions of the abundance of violence in society. This can be explained by cultivation theory. Cultivation theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Jackson-Beeck, 1979; Gerbner & Signorielli, 1990; Hawkins, Pingree, & Adler, 1987) suggests that continual viewing of media will systematically distort individual's perceptions of reality. Specifically, television viewing affects beliefs people have about the level of danger in society. The more people watch television, the more they believe that it accurately portrays the real world (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986). This is the cultivation effect.

Gerbner's cultivation effects sound strikingly familiar to marketers. Gerbner spoke of television distorting reality during the same time Pollay and Holbrook debated whether advertising was a "distorted mirror" or an accurate reflection of societal values (Gerbner et al., 1986; Holbrook, 1987; Pollay, 1986). From a violent content point-of-view, Pollay suggested that when advertising uses fear appeals, it promotes anxieties and insecurities – a cultivation effect (p. 23). In communication studies, researchers have found that viewing violent content on television is related to greater perceptions of the prevalence of violence in society (Hawkins et al., 1987; Hoffner et al., 2001) – often referred to as 'mean-world perceptions'. Some marketers suggest that advertising is one manner in which societal norms and values are reinforced in society (McCracken, 1987;

Mick & Buhl, 1992). Thus, viewers that are exposed to advertising that contains violent content may perceive society as violent and threatening.

*Proposition 4: Exposure to violent advertisements increases viewers' mean-world perceptions.*

In summary, critics of media violence suggest that there are strong direct, or at least indirect, effects of witnessing violence in the media including declining morals, desensitized audiences, and ultimately escalating levels of violence (L. R. Huesmann, 1986). Advertising is persuasive in nature, yet the effect on consumers of exposure to violent content in advertising remains an under-researched topic. On one hand, the consequences of processing violent advertising content may be more violent behaviour, more tolerance of violent behaviour, or more acceptance of mean-world perceptions. On the other hand, the use of violent content in advertisements may be effective in capturing a viewer's attention thereby raising awareness of social issues or product and service brands. Without further research, these questions will remain unanswered.

### **Conclusions, Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

This paper represents an initial inquiry into the area of violent advertising. Consistent with any exploratory research endeavour, a number of avenues for future research emerge from this study. These arise both from the limitations of the current research as well as from the discussion ensuing from such research.

Our frequency analysis examined primetime television and was limited to five Canadian television channels. Future research needs to examine the frequency of violent advertisements across a variety of programming times and across more channels. For example, if it was found that the frequency of violent advertisements was higher during children's viewing periods (for example, Saturday mornings) or on children's channels

(for example, Treehouse which was commercial free until 2006), this would be an area of concern for parents and policy makers.

We used a broad definition of violence in our analysis. Even though we used multiple raters to determine whether or not the ads contained violence, we, like researchers before us, did not control for the intensity of the violence in the ads. Depictions of intense violence are vivid, graphic, emotionally arousing and result in great harm, or the threat of great harm, to the target of the violence. For example, the display of a gory murder would be high in the intensity of the violence, whereas showing a person shoving in a crowded place might be considered low intensity of violence. During our study, it became evident that our sample contained advertisements with scenes of violence that varied in intensity ranging from violence which resulted in the loss of life to those where the violence resulted in little physical or mental harm. Because of this, our sample of ads may include some trivial forms of violence (that is the advertisements conformed to our definition of violence, but the violent act may have had minimal effects on the victim). Thus, future research needs to examine the intensity or level of violence in the advertisements alongside the frequency of violent portrayals.

Beyond intensity, there are a number of other potentially 'moderating' variables that need to be examined with respect to the effect on viewers and on society of violent advertisements. While it is intuitively appealing to condemn all violent content in advertising, it may have positive as well as negative effects. For example, violent advertising content is often used to raise awareness of social issues such as child abuse or terrorism. Under these circumstances, many would consider such violent content appropriate and capable of positive outcomes. Thus, further research should examine the

context and conditions under which violent content is used and whether it may have positive or negative effects on viewers.

Using extant theories from psychology and communications, we proposed four possible effects of exposure to violent advertising. These propositions need to be empirically examined to better address the question of “is there an effect”?

As recognized in a heated debate in the *Journal of Marketing* in the mid 1980s, advertising is an important social and cultural force. Despite their disagreement on the effects of advertising, Richard Pollay (1986) and Morris Holbrook (1987) described advertising as pervasive and environmental. While Holbrook defended advertising as a diverse industry with players striving to distinguish their brands using both positive and negative values, Pollay critiqued advertising as a collective, monolithic force that promoted materialism and greed, degraded people, subverted core values, and desensitized people to negative behaviours such as violence.

Our study reveals two things. First, violent content in Canadian television advertising is prevalent. Depending on the channel watched, advertisements containing violent imagery ranged from 11 percent to almost 16 percent of advertisements, and the majority of the violence portrayals were scenes of violence between people. Given that the CRTC imposes standards for advertising on television that are stricter than those for other media (for example, Internet advertising, magazine advertising, outdoor advertising), the frequency of violent imagery in advertising may be higher in other media than it is on television. Future research is needed to explore this contention.

Second, the effect of violent advertisements on both viewers and brands is a complex issue with unclear consequences. Studying whether there are industry

bandwagon effects is also important. For example, if one sponsor is achieving increased attention to their ads using violent imagery, will others in the industry follow suit? The inclusion of violent content in advertisements may have positive outcomes increasing viewer attention, making ads and their messages more memorable, and enhancing brand or organizational attitudes. While this may be socially desirable for certain social causes trying to draw attention to issues such as child abuse, it may be seen as less socially desirable for advertisements of commercial commodities. Furthermore, the use of violence may offend some viewers resulting in negative brand attitude. The effects of viewing violent ads may also have negative social effects on viewers such as heightened tolerance for violence or violent behavioural intentions. Thus, questions of whether violence in advertising should be used from a practitioner perspective or regulated from the perspective of a policy maker are impossible to answer given the current state of research on this topic. The effects of violent imagery may be contingent on the form, frequency, type and intensity of the violence portrayed. We hope that this paper sparks further interest in this important topic.

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