

## MALE RESPONSES TO FEMALE AGGRESSION

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The effects on males ( $N = 60$ ) of observing fictional aggression were assessed in a between-subjects design. Participants were randomly assigned to view either a film clip of professional women wrestlers, a mud wrestling segment, or a no-film control condition. Both films produced negative changes in mood states, principally an increase in aggression and a decrease in social affection. Exposure to the films failed to produce changes in men's acceptance of interpersonal violence against women, rape myth beliefs, or sexual callousness.

*Keywords:* female aggression, male responses, social affection.

Aggressive and sexual themes have been woven into media scripts since their earliest beginnings. Their presence is often seen as important ingredients if the public is to be entertained and the production a financial success. However, the increasing explicit nature of sexual portrayals and an expanding market for these materials have given rise to concerns regarding the social effects of exposure to this class of entertainment.

While there is a wealth of research investigating questions regarding the effects on viewers of media violence, only in recent years has there been a surge of research activity specifically assessing the effects of aggressive erotica. Inasmuch as men are the principal consumers of erotica and women, the all-too-frequent targets of men's wrath, aggressive erotica has been studied largely in regard to its impact on males. Reviews summarizing the effects on men of viewing erotica (e.g., Donnerstein & Linz, 1986; Malamuth & Donnerstein, 1982, 1984) have reported generally benign consequences when a consenting and equal power relationship is depicted and effects with harmful implications for women when coercion or aggression is introduced to a script. Thus, the potential for harm arising from exposure to aggressive erotica appears largely confined to the aggressive component. As Donnerstein and Linz (1986) have concluded: "Aggressive images are the issue, not sexual images" (p. 615).

However, under special circumstances, even erotic films which are essentially devoid of coercion or aggressive themes can produce unwanted effects (e.g., Linz, Donnerstein, & Penrod, 1984; Zillmann & Bryant, 1982, 1986). Following massive exposure to erotica (nearly 5 hours of viewing over a 6 week period), Zillmann and Bryant (1982) found that men expressed less support for the women's liberation movement, recommended lighter jail terms for convicted rapists, and exhibited an increase in sexual callousness toward women. More recently, massive exposure to erotica has been shown to create a preference for viewing more extreme forms of

pornography, i.e., bondage, sadomasochism, and bestiality (Zillman & Bryant, 1986). Thus, under the conditions of protracted viewing, even nonaggressive erotica has been shown to produce a variety of changes in men's sexual beliefs, dispositions toward women, and viewing preferences.

There is further evidence to suggest that full-length feature films in which sexual violence is portrayed as having positive consequences for women can also produce antisocial effects. Men assigned to view sexually violent movies were subsequently more accepting of violence in their relationships with women and showed a tendency toward a greater acceptance of male myths regarding rape than were participants who viewed neutral control films (Malamuth & Check, 1981).

However, aggression need not be embedded in a sexual context to effect major changes in men's attitudes and inclinations toward women. Donnerstein and Berkowitz (1985) used a film condition in which women were aggressed against in a context virtually devoid of sexual themes. Men viewing the film were subsequently more aggressive toward a female confederate than others who saw either a sexually explicit, nonaggressive film or a neutral film (the highest levels of aggression followed exposure to an aggressive pornographic film). Furthermore, the aggression-only film led males to express more sexually callused attitudes and a greater likelihood of committing rape than participants in any of the three remaining conditions.

The observation of female combatants is a relatively uncommon experience both in real life and in media portrayals of interpersonal aggression. Not surprisingly, research activity has mirrored this fact inasmuch as the effects of viewing female to female aggression have rarely been tested. One early investigation (Rosene, 1970) suggests that the effects may be similar to those typically found to result from the observation of male aggression. Rosene included as one of several film conditions a five minute segment in which two coeds wrestled topless on a bed in a tussle that featured hair pulling and arm twisting. Angered males exhibited an increase in aggression (shock) following exposure to the sexually arousing/aggressive clip; participants who instead viewed either an erotic or a "justified" violence segment showed equivalent increases in aggression.

Opportunities to witness aggression between females are limited to staged fights in that ill-defined area between sport and entertainment. Among the few settings in which interfemale aggression can be found are roller derby and professional wrestling including its more erotic variants, mud and oil wrestling. From the perspectives of most audiences, the aggression itself can be characterized as fictional. For example, university students overwhelmingly see wrestling as a spoof (Arms, Russell, & Sandilands, 1979). However, despite their fictional qualities, staged performances have nonetheless been found to increase the hostility of observers (e.g., Arms et al., 1979).

Mud wrestlers engaged in mock combat provide largely male audiences with aggressive erotica under conditions which seemingly debase the dignity of the participants and women in general. A performance typically begins with physically attractive females who, after obligatory, introductions and exchanges of threats, set about to defile each other for the entertainment of spectators. Although films portraying females in ostensibly degrading circumstances have been used in previous

investigations (e.g., Zillmann, Bryant, Comisky, & Medoff, 1981), there has been relatively little theorizing directed toward specifying the defining conditions of degradation.

The intent in the present investigation then was to explore the effects on men of viewing female aggression in two settings, each with differing emphases. The first (professional wrestling) features physical aggression with subtle sexual overtones. In the second setting (mud wrestling) physical aggression is somewhat subdued while eroticism and degradation appear to be prominent. Both types of wrestling were predicted to increase observer aggression. However, because mud wrestling features an additional theme of degradation, it was expected to increase the aggression of observers over and above that resulting from exposure to professional wrestling. That is, depictions of mud wrestling appear to represent the category of arousing, aggressive, and displeasing/disturbing erotica, a film condition previously shown to increase retaliatory aggression (Zillmann et al., 1981). Furthermore, earlier findings (e.g., Arms et al., 1979) of an overall deterioration in the quality of other covarying mood states resulting from men viewing intermale aggression were also tested in an expanded context involving female fighters.

## METHOD

### PARTICIPANTS

Participants were male volunteers ( $N = 60$ ) recruited from the introductory psychology sample pool at the University of Lethbridge and had a mean age of 20.3 years ( $SD = 3.5$ ). The sign-up sheet included an ethically-mandated statement that participants would be exposed to some nudity and coarse language, a warning later repeated in the experimental instructions.

### MEASURES

The principal dependent measure of aggression was assessed by means of the short version of the Nowlis (1965) Mood Adjective Check List (MALL), an introspective self report of one's current affective state. It preceded all other measures in the battery. Also included were the Acceptance of Interpersonal Violence (AIV) and Rape Myth Acceptance (RMA) scales (Burt, 1980) as well as a measure of sexual callousness (SC) toward women (Mosher, 1971).

The first of two supplemental measures sought to assess the extent to which men were in sympathy with several issues of particular interest to women, e.g., provision of day care facilities. The second asked participants to consider the circumstances of a rape for which the accused had been found guilty and to recommend an appropriate sentence (Zillmann & Bryant, 1982).

### PROCEDURE

The experiment was conducted in a small room furnished with a table, two viewing chairs, a color television monitor, and a video cassette recorder. Individual participants arriving for the experiment were met by either of two female researchers and were instructed as follows:

“Hi! I’m (Mary/Veronica). I’ve been hired by Professor Russell to run the participants in his study. Thanks for keeping your appointment. We are going to ask you to watch a 20-minute film clip of women wrestlers and complete some ratings on your reactions to the film. There are also several other scales we would like you to complete. However, we don’t want your name on any of the scales so your responses will be completely anonymous. I must warn you again that there may be some nudity and coarse language in the film so if you would rather not see the film for any reason, it is perfectly okay: You will still receive your research participation credit. Later in the study I’ll ask you to complete a questionnaire and place it in that box (point to the partially full box under the table). Your research credits will be automatically recorded on your grade sheet. Okay, what do you think? Are you willing to see the film or would you prefer to leave? Either way is perfectly okay” [None chose to leave].

Using a partial blind technique, participants were at this point randomly assigned to 1 of 3 experimental conditions: (1) a 20-minute film clip of professional women wrestlers taken from the 1981 MGM movie *All The Marbles*, (2) a clip of equal length featuring ladies’ (topless) mud wrestling edited from an x-rated MEGA film *Daddy’s Little Girls* (1983), and (3) a no-film control condition. The spectators depicted in both films were highly aroused and vociferous during the bouts. Crude language and insults were common throughout.

An independent evaluation of the two films was additionally undertaken. Students ( $N = 80$ ) in senior psychology classes provided ratings on 5-point scales of the extent to which the wrestling action was realistic, exciting, and fast-paced. Two other scales assessed (1) the degree to which the actresses were degraded, and (2) how degrading the wrestling matches were for women generally.

### RESULTS

The ratings of the two films revealed that they did not differ in the amount of fictionalized content ( $t < 1$ ). However, the “Marbles” clip was seen as more exciting,  $t(78) = 2.87$ ,  $p < .005$ , and fast paced,  $t(78) = 5.27$ ,  $p < .001$  than the mud wrestling sequence. Surprisingly, actresses in the two films were seen to be equally degraded by their participation ( $M = 3.65$ , Marbles;  $M = 3.73$ , “Mud”,  $t < 1$ ) as were women in general ( $M = 3.63$  Marbles;  $M = 3.67$  Mud,  $t < 1$ ).

One-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were calculated for each of the dependent variables and film conditions. Significant differences were found on three of the MACL scales: the social affection scale  $F(2, 57) = 6.37$ ,  $p = .0032$ , the aggression scale,  $F(2, 57) = 4.55$ ,  $p = .0147$ , and the concentration scale,  $F(2, 57) = 3.54$ ,  $p = .0356$ . Protected  $t$  tests were administered to each of these significant findings. The Marbles

condition was significantly different from the control condition ( $p < .001$ ,  $df = 57$ , two-tailed) on all three of these scales: participants in the Marbles condition were more aggressive ( $t = 2.92$ ,  $LSD = 2.13$ ), less concentrating ( $t = 2.45$ ,  $LSD = 2.05$ ), and less socially affectionate ( $t = 3.25$ ,  $LSD = 2.50$ ) than those in the control condition. Participants assigned to the Mud condition were also significantly different than the controls, namely, they were more aggressive ( $p < .01$ ,  $t = 2.11$ ,  $LSD = 1.64$ ,  $df = 57$ , two-tailed) and less socially affectionate ( $p < .001$ ,  $t = 2.90$ ,  $LSD = 2.50$ ,  $df = 57$ , two-tailed). There was no difference between Mud and control participants in terms of concentration but participants in the Marbles condition were less concentrating than those in the Mud condition ( $p < .001$ ,  $t = 2.12$ ,  $LSD = 2.05$ ,  $df = 57$ , two-tailed). Analyses of the attitudinal/belief measures (i.e., A1V, RMA, SC, womens' issues, and trivialization of rape) yielded nonsignificant differences across the three experimental conditions.

## DISCUSSION

The unsuccessful attempt to operationalize a distinct degradation condition by means of actresses wrestling topless in a makeshift mud pit is deserving of preliminary comment. It was anticipated that the portrayal of professional wrestlers, suitably attired and performing in a more elegant setting, would be seen as less degrading than that involving women grappling in the mud. It would appear that differences in the conditions under which the actresses wrestled in the two films were too subtle cognitively to register with the participants. That is to say, the settings in which the bouts were staged were not the most salient features of the films. In all likelihood, participants' initiation to the exceptional and unanticipated spectacle of females wrestling cognitively overrode any contextual differences between the films. Indeed, the films produced a virtually identical pattern of negative mood changes, the exception being a greater concentration on the mud wrestlers.

A further plausible explanation would allow that insofar as both events can by a generous definition be construed as "sports", the usual standards by which raters judge peoples' circumstances are temporarily suspended, i.e., on those occasions when performers voluntarily enter into the fray. Also, the opening scenes in the mud wrestling film saw the actresses frolicking rather than engaging in serious combat. Although the women appeared to fight in deadly earnest thereafter, their initial playfulness and apparent enjoyment of their circumstances may have lessened the raters' overall perception of degradation.

From the foregoing, we would propose that the perception of degradation is principally influenced in this situation by two factors: (1) the extent to which the wrestlers' participation is seen to be voluntary and, (2) is regarded as a positive experience by the participants. The perception of degradation is thereby maximized when participation is involuntary and the participants appear to experience displeasure/pain. Neither qualifying condition prevailed in the mud wrestling film. The set of attitudes/beliefs assessed in the present investigation was unaffected by exposure to female aggression. Possibly, in the absence of male aggressors there were insufficient bases for participants to identify with the principles in order to

effect changes in attitudes. Moreover, the presence of slightly older and more mature female experimenters may have inhibited the attitude change process particularly as they maintained a neutral, nonjudgmental demeanor throughout. By contrast, where permissive cues have been provided by females men have subsequently displayed increased aggression against women (Leonard & Taylor, 1983). The increase in AIV and RMA scores found in the Malamuth and Check (1981) investigation and the increase in callousness and related effects reported by Zillmann and Bryant (1982) were observed after intervals of several days and six weeks, respectively, following participants' initial exposure to the films. Thus, the possibility of delayed effects remains open in the present investigation. That is to say, while exposure to the films produced no evidence of immediate effects on men's attitudes/beliefs, the suggestion of Malamuth and Check (1981) that a "sleeper effect" might occur with the passage of time cannot be discounted. As the experimental and fictional aspects of the films become dissociated from the sexual/aggressive content, long term influences on attitudes and beliefs might reasonably be expected to occur.

The effects of exposure to both film conditions on mood states is consistent with the pattern of results found among spectators exposed to real-life, fictional aggression. Students attending an all-male professional wrestling card showed similar declines in MACL social affection and surgency with a corresponding increase in aggression (Arms et al., 1979). Thus, the observation of fictional aggression has been shown to induce qualitatively inferior mood states in both laboratory and field settings, a finding that also extends to those actually engaging in fictional aggression, i.e., aggressive video games (Anderson & Ford, 1987). The major finding of an increase in MACL aggression following exposure specifically to female combatants adds further weight to an already extensive body of evidence on the effects of witnessing aggression. Both general reviews (e.g., Geen, 1983; Goranson, 1970) and those of research specifically conducted in the context of sport (Russell, 1983) reached similar conclusions viz., the observation of aggression tends generally to increase the aggression of observers. In summary, exposure to female aggression for short durations does not appear to effect immediate changes in men's attitudes/beliefs toward women. Such effects as are produced appear to be confined to negative changes in several mood states, including an increase in, aggression. However, the marked deterioration in moods has, nonetheless, important implications for the quality and direction of men's ongoing relationships with women. Although ostensibly trivial in their consequences, negative shifts in mood and the responses they engender may instead, set a relationship on a course of escalating hostility from which it is often difficult for the parties to extricate themselves (Goldstein, Davis, Kernis, & Cohn, 1981). The potential for serious harm arising from such small beginnings should be judged in the light of Zahn's (1980) observation that a disproportionate number of homicides involving intimates originates with disputes over exceedingly petty matters.

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