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More Than Shoot-Em-Up and Torture Porn: Reflective Appropriation and Meaning-Making of Violent Media Content

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Media violence research has mainly focused on aggression effects so far. But are audiences' thoughts about violent portrayals actually confined to aggressive fantasies? This study examines more complex thought processes about violent portrayals that involve reflection, meaning-making, and truth-seeking about violence as a fact of social reality. We conducted qualitative in-depth interviews with 39 participants from different backgrounds, including professions at risk for exposure to violence, media professionals, and interviewees from the general population. The interviews revealed three main categories of reflective thoughts about violent media content, including thoughts about (a) the truth value, (b) the life-world relevance, and (c) the psychological and moral implications of the violence depicted. Participants also discussed unrealistic content features that interfered with meaning-making.

Why do some portrayals of violence seem cheap or escapist, and others seem meaningful and important? How do we, as audiences, make such evaluations? What makes it worth our while to grapple with scenes of bloodshed or suffering? The current qualitative study attempts to take a close look at the thought content of audiences for violent media content, examining how viewers use and make sense of such content. In particular, we were interested in understanding instances when violent content left individuals reflective, and the nature and outcomes of that reflection process.

Based on theories of eudaimonic, "truth-seeking" motivations for media consumption (Oliver & Raney, 2011; Tamborini, Bowman, Eden, Grizzard, & Organ, 2010; Wirth, Hofer, & Schramm, 2012), we argue that some types of violent content

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might be attractive because they offer an opportunity for reflective appropriation and meaning-making. For example, audiences might appreciate watching even stressful, gory films (e.g., about domestic abuse or gang war) if such films provide a serious and insightful reflection of complex realities and acknowledge the human cost fully rather than glorifying or eliding the violence.

Consistent with this, an emerging line of qualitative and quantitative research suggests that consumers of violent media content are not only driven by a desire for fun and suspense, but also, in some instances, by more complex motivations. Studies of violent video games, for example, suggest that players sometimes seek competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Olson, 2010; Ryan, Rigby, & Przybylski, 2006) or even insight and meaningfulness (Oliver et al., 2015). Moreover, there is some indication that violent media content can prompt complex thought processes that involve reflection and meaning-making about violence as a fact of social reality (Bartsch & Mares, 2014; Jørgensen, Skarstein, & Schultz, 2015; Oliver et al., 2015; Schlesinger, Dobash, Dobash, & Weaver, 1992).

General research on meaningful, eudaimonic media experiences has linked such experiences to a variety of positive, prosocial outcomes. These include issue interest and information seeking about social and political issues (Bartsch & Schneider, 2014; Oliver, Dillard, Bae, & Tamul, 2012), and prosocial changes in attitudes and behavioral intentions toward social groups (Oliver, Hartmann, & Woolley, 2012; Oliver, Kim, Hoewe, Shade, & Cooke, 2013). Given this, it seems important to gain a deeper understanding of how audiences use violent media content as an opportunity for meaning-making. Such prosocial responses might possibly act as buffers against negative, antisocial effects of media violence, and might explain individuals' differential susceptibility to negative effects (Slater, Henry, Swaim, & Cardador, 2004; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013).

This study aims to extend research on audiences' perception of meaning and realism in violent portrayals by using qualitative interviews to elucidate the thought content associated with media violence. We conducted in-depth interviews with participants from different backgrounds, including professions at risk for exposure to violence (military and law enforcement personnel), media professionals (film makers and parental guidance raters), as well as interview partners from the general population who did not have this kind of professional involvement with either mediated or real-world violence.

Theoretical background

Audience effects of media violence are one of the most intensively studied and debated topics in communication research, including violent portrayals in audiovisual media such as movies and television (Anderson et al., 2003; Bushman & Huesmann, 2006; Gerbner & Gross, 1976) as well as newer, interactive media like video games (Breuer, Vogelgesang, Quandt, & Festl, 2015; Ferguson, 2015; Konijn, Bijvank, & Bushman, 2007). Despite decades of research and meta-analyses, the

controversy about the robustness of negative audience effects of media violence has recently been revived—with positions ranging from moderate-sized media effects on human aggression (e.g., Anderson et al., 2010; Greitemeyer & Mügge, 2014), to a contingent mix of stronger and weaker effects (e.g., Slater et al., 2004), to small or insignificant effects (e.g., Ferguson, 2007; Ferguson, 2015). Critiques have focused on methods (Elson & Ferguson, 2014; Rothstein & Bushman, 2015), theoretical underpinnings of media violence effects (e.g., Bushman & Huesmann, 2006; Ferguson & Dyck, 2012; Gauntlett, 2005), and concerns about exaggeration of negative effects akin to moral panic (e.g., Thompson, 1998).

What has remained remarkably consistent, though, is the focus of the debate on a core set of (debated) negative effects including increases in aggressive affect, cognition and behavior, and decreases in empathy and prosocial behavior. This dominant focus of media violence research on possible harmful, antisocial effects is understandable. However, as several authors have recently argued (e.g., Livingstone, 2007; Olson, 2010; Oswald, Prorock, & Murphy, 2014), the violence-aggression debate *per se* falls short of capturing the whole complexity of audience responses to violent media content.

First, research has drawn attention to fright reactions to media violence (Harrison & Cantor, 1999; Wilson, 2008), and to the cultivation of mean-world beliefs such as fear of victimization and distrust toward other people (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Hetsroni & Tukachinsky, 2006). Although some recent researches suggest that the effects of fictional depictions on beliefs about real-life crime are limited (Ferguson, 2013; Merritt, LaQuea, Cromwell, & Ferguson, 2016), it seems safe to conclude that in addition to the aggressive perspective of perpetrators, the fearful perspective of victims can factor into audience effects of media violence as well.

Second, and in line with the aversiveness of fright reactions, a growing body of research from a uses and gratifications perspective suggests that violence *per se* is not intrinsically appealing for most audiences. Rather, audiences seem to be attracted to violence for other gratifications. These include exposure to co-occurring content such as action or restoration of justice; experiences such as thrill and suspense (Valkenburg & Cantor, 2000; Wakshlag, Vial, & Tamborini, 1983; Zillmann, 1998); or the satisfaction of needs such as competence, autonomy, and insight (Oliver et al., 2015; Olson, 2010; Ryan et al., 2006).

Third, and of particular relevance to our research focus, qualitative audience research has drawn attention to more active and reflective forms of audience responses to violent content (e.g., Hill, 1997; Jørgensen et al., 2015; Schlesinger et al., 1992; Shaw, 2004).

Qualitative research on audiences' meaning-making from violent media content

Shaw (2004) conducted in-depth interviews with adults about the function and value of violence in films. Interviewees spoke of the importance of films showing violence "as it really is" (p. 136), and gory scenes were perceived as justified and acceptable to the extent that they were central to the plot and were realistic. Realism was valued in part because of the perceived opportunity for insights into unfamiliar violent contexts

(e.g., mafia interactions or inner city gangs), and because realistic representations might help other viewers see the true negative consequences of violence and potentially discourage them from aggression.

Audiences' role as active interpreters and their preference for nuanced and realistic portrayals of violence are also reflected in the work of Schlesinger and colleagues (Schlesinger, Haynes, Boyle, & McNair, 1998; Schlesinger et al., 1992). Notably, Schlesinger et al.'s (1992) study involved groups of women who had experienced violence and found that these women "were more sensitive to televised violence, more subtle and complex in their readings, more concerned about possible effects and more demanding in their expectations of the producers of such content" (p. 165).

Processes of reflection and meaning-making have also been studied in the context of violent news content. For example, Jørgensen et al. (2015) interviewed Norwegian children in the year after the mass killings in Norway on 22 July 2011, and found that they tried to impose narrative structures on the images and descriptions they had encountered in the news. In particular, they tried to offer explanations about why Anders Breivik had engaged in the shooting, and struggled to find a resolution to the "story."

Taken together, the qualitative findings draw attention to audiences' active reception of violent media content as an opportunity to confront and make sense of violence as a painful, yet essential fact of social reality. Audiences were critical and selective concerning the types of violent portrayals that constitute appropriate occasions for meaning-making, with a preference for realistic as opposed to glamorized or sanitized portrayals.

Integration of qualitative and quantitative approaches in media violence research

The qualitative findings reviewed above differ from quantitative media effects research not only in methodology but also in their tendency to focus on meaning contexts rather than on causal effects (Livingstone, 2007). Integrative frameworks that help bridge these differences between qualitative and quantitative examinations of media violence are only beginning to emerge. For example, Schlesinger and colleagues (Schlesinger et al., 1992; Schlesinger et al., 1998) combined focus group discussions with quantitative surveys administered before and after shared viewing of violent television programs. The quantitative survey data about participants' backgrounds, prior experiences with violence, and initial responses to the program were used to aid interpretation of participants' statements in the focus groups.

More recently, research of Oliver and her colleagues (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010; Oliver & Hartmann, 2010; Oliver & Raney, 2011; Oliver et al., 2015) employed a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods to examine the role of meaning-making as a motivation for entertainment consumption in general (including, but not limited to, violent entertainment). Drawing on the distinction in ancient philosophy between hedonic and eudaimonic happiness (i.e., happiness derived from pleasure vs. happiness derived from meaning and insight), Oliver and Raney (2011) conceptualized individuals' attractions to thought-provoking entertainment

as a form of eudaimonic motivation, whereby viewers "search for and ponder life's meanings, truths, and purposes" (p. 985).

Oliver and Hartmann (2010) conducted a qualitative analysis of individuals' written descriptions of themes and lessons learned from meaningful movies. They found that viewers reflected on the value and fleetingness of life, the importance of human virtue and endurance, and the inevitability of sadness, cruelty, and pain as part of the human condition. Although these categories of thoughts were derived from a broader sample of films that respondents had nominated as "meaningful," including both violent and nonviolent movies, the categories partly overlap with findings from in-depth interviews on media violence (e.g., Hill, 1997; Shaw, 2004). In particular, audiences' motivation to confront the whole truth about the cruel and painful aspects of human existence emerged across both types of studies.

Within the same theoretical framework of eudaimonic entertainment motivations, quantitative survey research has examined the experience of "eudaimonic appreciation" that typically accompanies audiences' reflective engagement with media entertainment. Oliver and Bartsch (2010) described eudaimonic appreciation as "an experiential state that is characterized by the perception of deeper meaning, the feeling of being moved, and the motivation to elaborate on thoughts and feelings inspired by the experience" (p. 76). Their eudaimonic appreciation scale (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010) has recently been applied in the context of media violence research (Bartsch & Mares, 2014) to examine eudaimonic motivations for viewing violent and gory portrayals. Specifically, Bartsch and Mares (2014) examined the assumption that film viewers may override their aversion to scenes of graphic gore and decide to see a film despite the presence of such content, if they anticipate that the depiction of violence will occasion eudaimonic, meaning-making responses. Consistent with this reasoning, individuals' perception of gore and meaningfulness in film trailers interacted such that a negative influence of gore on viewing likelihood was compensated at high levels of perceived meaningfulness. In line with the results of qualitative audience research, these findings suggest that (in addition to other motivations such as fun and suspense) some types of violent and even gory content may be sought by audiences as an opportunity for reflection and meaning-making.

Rationale and research questions

Our research aims to further the convergence of qualitative and quantitative approaches to the study of media violence by integrating insights from qualitative audience research with the emerging research on eudaimonic appreciation of violent media content. We opted to conduct qualitative in-depth interviews because this methodological approach offers more profound insight into the thought content associated with audiences' reflective appropriation of media violence than the analysis of written descriptions employed in Oliver and Hartmann's (2010) study. At the same time, our research questions are informed by findings from quantitative research on eudaimonic appreciation of violent media content.

Our first research question builds on Bartsch and Mares' (2014) finding that perceived meaningfulness was a critical factor in explaining the audience appeal of violent and even gory portrayals. In accord with qualitative findings (Hill, 1997; Schlesinger et al., 1992; Shaw, 2004), we took this eudaimonic, meaning-making function as given, and asked about the specific thought content associated with eudaimonic experiences of insight, meaning, and cognitive challenge in the context of media violence: What types of thought content are associated with audiences' eudaimonic appreciation of violent media content (RQ1)?

Our second research question is based on Bartsch and Mares' (2014) finding that not all types of violent portrayals were perceived as equally meaningful, moving, and thought-provoking (see also, Hill, 1997; Schlesinger et al., 1992; Shaw, 2004). We were interested to explore the specific conditions under which violent media content is appreciated by audiences as an adequate object of reflective appropriation and meaning-making: What types of content features are associated with audiences' eudaimonic appreciation of violent media content, and what types of content features are not (RQ2)?

Method

To elucidate the specific types of thoughts (RQ1) and content features (RQ2) associated with audiences' meaning-making from violent media content, we conducted qualitative in-depth interviews with a sample of 39 participants from different backgrounds including professions at risk for exposure to violence, media professionals, and interview partners from the general population. Participants were interviewed individually in their familiar surroundings to encourage elaborate interview statements that reflected the complexities of their thought processes.

Participants

Following the principles of theoretical sampling (Bryman, 1988; Silverman, 2014), participants were selected based on criteria derived from our theoretical research interest. In addition to the study of typical cases, theoretical sampling also involves the identification and study of atypical cases that are of theoretical interest. In line with our research questions that asked about different types of thoughts and content features associated with audiences' meaning-making from violent media content, participants should differ in terms of their experience and expertise dealing with real-world violence, and their experience and expertise with the production and analysis of violent media content. Therefore, three groups of research participants were interviewed: (a) participants with professions that placed them at risk of violence (military and law enforcement personnel), (b) media professionals (film makers and parental guidance raters), and (c) participants from the general population without such professional involvement with either mediated or real-world violence. The final sample consisted of 39 participants, 27 male and 12 female. The participants were aged between 18 and 54 (for an overview of the distribution of age, gender, and occupational groups in the sample, and interview IDs, see Table 1).

Table 1 Participants' professional experience and expertise with real-world violence and media portrayals of violence.

Background of Interviewees		
Professions at risk for exposure to violence (11 participants)	Media professionals (11 participants)	General population (17 participants)
ID22 (m, 25)	ID1 (m, 29)	ID2 (f, 26)
ID25 (m, 23)	ID6 (f, 54)	ID3 (m, 22)
ID26 (m, 29)	ID7 (m, 25)	ID4 (m, 24)
ID27 (m, 20)	ID8 (m, 37)	ID5 (m, 18)
ID28 (m, 22)	ID9 (m, 31)	ID12 (f, 22)
ID29 (m, 28)	ID10 (m, 32)	ID13 (f, 21)
ID30 (m, 26)	ID11 (m, 30)	ID15 (f, 54)
ID31 (m, 26)	ID14 (m, 46)	ID16 (m, 20)
ID32 (m, 48)	ID19 (f, 44)	ID17 (m, 25)
ID33 (f, 48)	ID21 (m, 27)	ID18 (m, 19)
ID37 (m, 23)	ID39 (f, 32)	ID20 (f, 23)
		ID23 (m, 22)
		ID24 (f, 20)
		ID34 (f, 20)
		ID35 (m, 19)
		ID36 (f, 20)
		ID38 (m, 27)

Note: The table shows interview identification numbers (ID) as referenced in the quotes. Participants' gender and age are included in parentheses.

Procedure

Before going into the field, a pilot study was conducted to test different versions of the interview guideline with a sample of 21 participants. The final interview guideline was developed based on the questions that most naturally elicited elaborate interview statements in the pilot study. The interviews were conducted in December 2014 and January 2015 in Germany. Participants were recruited through personal contacts of the researchers and their students but were not personally known to the researchers. In the case of soldiers, permission to conduct the interviews was obtained from the Federal Armed Forces. Interviewees received a €20 gift certificate in return for their participation.

The interviews lasted about 30 minutes and took place in participants' familiar surroundings (e.g., at home, in a quiet place at work, or, in the case of soldiers, at the barracks). Participants were first informed about the interview procedure, including recording, transcription, anonymization, and confidentiality. Then they completed a short questionnaire including demographic information (age, gender, profession, and education) and contact details. Next, the study background was explained by the interviewer, and the participant's informed consent was documented using a consent

form. A semistructured interview guideline, consisting of a series of open-ended questions, was used to help participants elaborate on issues relevant to the research questions and to ensure that all key topics were covered. The interview guideline was implemented without strict adherence to the order of questions, in order to facilitate a natural flow of recall and elaboration.

The interview started with a question that asked participants to think of an example of violent media content (e.g., a movie, book, television series, documentary, or news item) that left them with a lasting impression. Then the interviewees were asked to describe the content and themes of violent portrayals that made them think about violence. A reverse question then asked about the types of media violence that were perceived as less than thought-provoking, and that could not be taken seriously. Next, the interviewees were asked to explain how violent media content was related to their life-world experience with violence (including own experiences, experiences of close others, and professional experience). Further questions asked about individual motives for exposure to violent media content. Finally, interviewees were asked about the social context of using violent content (e.g., if alone or in groups), their socialization, and childhood experiences with media violence. Each interview was fully recorded and transcribed. The interviews were analyzed using MAXQDA software.

Inductive category development

Consistent with an exploratory research design, the material was analyzed using both pre-existing categories derived from theoretical propositions, and categories developed from the interviews. First, each interviewer and a second member of the research team wrote short interpretations of the interview which were used to develop inductive categories: If recurring types of statements were not adequately represented in the theoretically derived category system, new categories were formed (Mayring, 2000). Second, all interview transcripts were coded, and the category system was again revised to complement missing categories, to divide up broad categories, and to collapse infrequent or overlapping categories. Third, main categories were formed based on cross-references between statements in the basic categories that revealed overarching meaning structures in the interviews. For an overview of the categories and frequency counts of statements, see Figures 1 – 3.

Results

To contextualize our main findings we begin with a short description of contextual categories including media genres and topics discussed by the interviewees as examples of thought-provoking violent content, and their motivations and social context of using this content. We then present the core categories that deal with our primary research interest, that is, the types of thoughts and content features associated with audiences' eudaimonic appreciation of violent media content. Because of space limitations, results are discussed for the entire sample, without an in-depth

analysis of differences associated with participants' gender, their social background, or their experience with violence. Figures 1–3 give an overview of the meaning structure derived from the interviews, including contextual, main, and subcategories of statements with frequency counts in parentheses. Quotes from the interviews in the text below are annotated with participant identification number (ID) and transcript line in parentheses.[1]

Contextual categories: Media genres, topics, motivations, and social context of using violent media content

When asked about examples of violent content that struck them as thought-provoking, participants discussed various types of *media and genres*. Movies were the medium from which by far the most examples were cited, followed by television series, news and documentaries, Internet real footage, and books. Some of the interviewees mentioned violent video games, but game violence was typically discussed as less than thought-provoking, and the violence itself was considered secondary to experiences of challenge and competition:

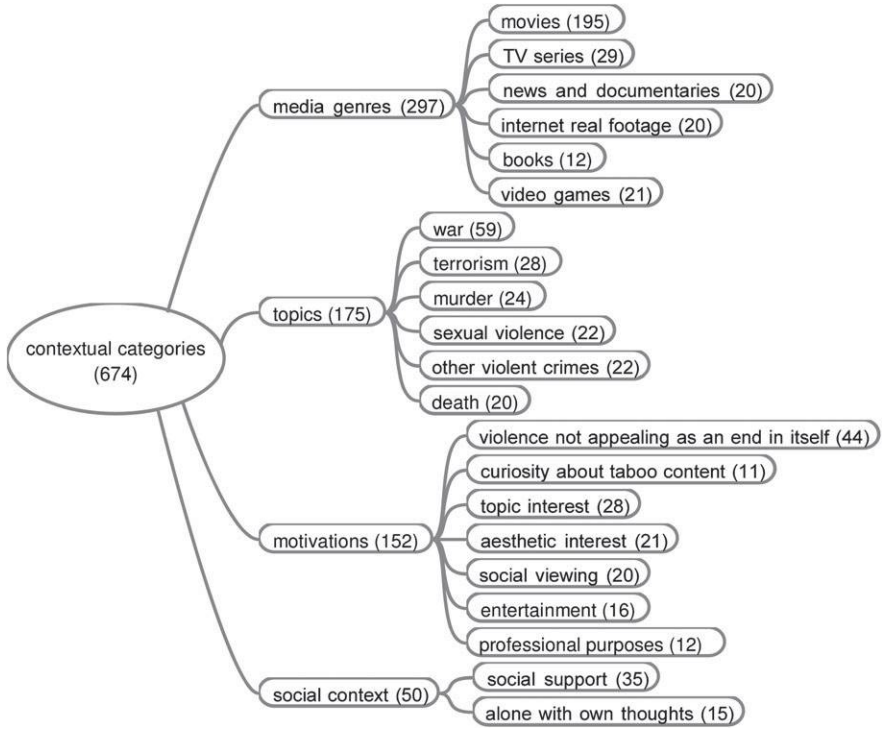

Figure 1 Overview of contextual categories. *Note:* Numbers in parentheses are frequency counts. Categories were counted several times per interview if interviewees made several statements in the same category but in different meaning context (e.g., if statements in the same category were repeated when speaking about different examples of media content).

> Well, speaking of violent games such as first person shooters, violent portrayals are not in the foreground for me here. For me, competition and problem-solving are more important. (ID9, 41)

The most frequent *topic* discussed in the context of thought-provoking examples of violent media content was war, followed by terrorism, murder, sexual violence, other violent crimes, and death.

When asked about their *motivations* for using thought-provoking forms of violent media content, almost all interviewees insisted that watching violence was not appealing to them as an end in itself, yet some mentioned curiosity about taboo content. Cognitive motives, such as topic interest, were frequently reported; however, many participants pointed out that thought-provoking experiences often occurred as a by-product of using violent content for other reasons, including the quality of stories, aesthetic representation, social viewing, entertainment, or professional purposes.

In terms of *social context*, most participants preferred to view violent content with others for reasons of social support and shared meaning-making, but some preferred to view thought-provoking violent content by themselves to be alone with their thoughts.

Thoughts about violent media content: Overview of the main categories

The interviews revealed three main categories of thought content associated with reflective and meaningful experiences of media violence. Interviewees elaborated on

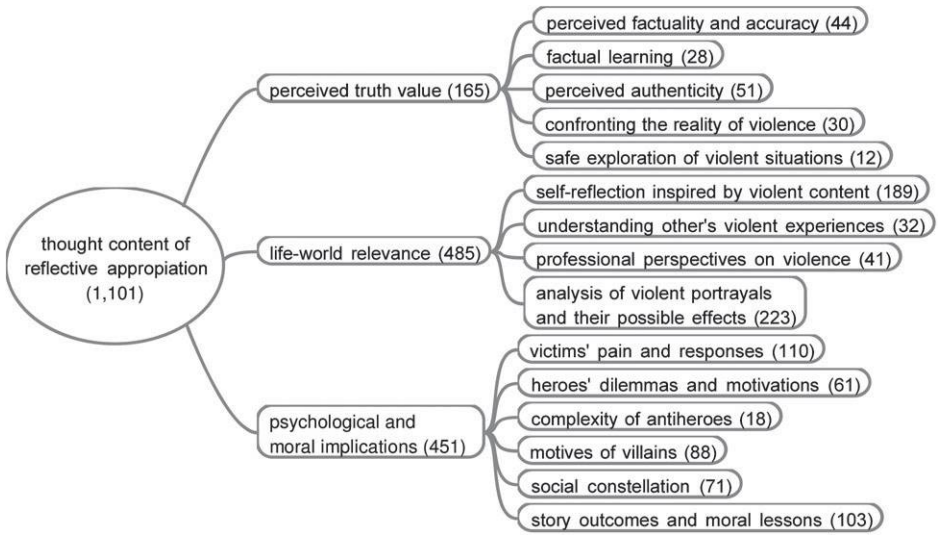

Figure 2 Thought content associated with reflective appropriation of media violence. *Note:* Numbers in parentheses are frequency counts. Categories were counted several times per interview if interviewees made several statements in the same category but in different meaning context (e.g., if statements in the same category were repeated when speaking about different examples of media content).

(a) the truth value of violent portrayals, (b) the life-world relevance of violent media content, and (c) the psychological and moral implications of the violence depicted. In addition, two main categories of statements covered content features that interfered with meaning-making. Interviewees discussed (d) cues to lack of seriousness and realism of violent media content and (e) overwhelming experiences with extreme violent portrayals that they were unable to make sense of. These five main categories of statements and their subcategories are explained and illustrated with quotes from the interviews below.

Perceived truth value of violent media content

When asked about their reasons for deeper reflection of violent media content, virtually all participants discussed issues related to the perceived truth value of the content which constitutes our first main category. For example, they reported that they learned new information, or gained more profound understanding about historical or current events. They also discussed the representational relationship of media and reality, including statements about the factual accuracy, realism, and authenticity of people and events portrayed.

Perceived factuality and accuracy

A first subtype of statements dealt with the factuality and accuracy of violent media content. One of the key motivations for cognitive elaboration discussed by participants in the context of both news and fiction was the trustworthiness of the content as a source of information about historical or current events. Statements in this category emphasized that the events depicted did actually happen, or that they were based on a true story.

> A war movie or a movie on a concentration camp or so, where you truly know that this happened as depicted and, for sure, there was a real story like the one in the film. That really makes me reflect on these things. (ID20, 27)

Factual learning

Second, participants discussed the usefulness of the content as a source of factual knowledge. In this context, interviewees also spoke of their criteria and strategies for verifying the truth value, specifically in the case of fictional content.

> You should know that the author has studied history. And he is really able to tell such stories. The characters are brilliantly researched, the novels are well-written. History is woven into the plot events of course. And there are historic characters as well. That's pretty damn good. (ID32, 46)

> When it said "based on a true story," it happened that I googled the facts that really took place and how things really developed. (ID11, 24)

Perceived authenticity

Third, the authenticity of violent content was frequently discussed as a source of thought-provoking experiences. In addition to factual learning (what really

happened), interviewees were interested in finding out the authentic experience of people in the situation (what it is actually like).

> And I just wanted to see what is going on there. How does war feel from human to human, what is happening there? That's my motivation. (ID22, 60)

Confronting the reality of violence

Fourth, although brutal depictions of real-world violence were described as highly unpleasant, participants emphasized their need to confront the full truth, and pointed out that these kinds of portrayals might serve as a wakeup call for others to take the issue seriously. In this context, several participants discussed the value of brutal or even gory portrayals of violence that reflect the full severity and human cost of the violent situations and events.

> For instance, the movie *Saving Private Ryan*, there is this famous scene at the beginning of the film, Normandy invasion, and that is a very blunt depiction of war. Some soldier, I don't know which one, is yelling for his mother, you see that another is shot in the head and another one is looking for his arm and runs around with no arm and is looking for his arm. So, that's very realistic and shocking in this case, but authentic. And then it's okay. Even though it is extremely brutal. (ID3, 24)

Safe exploration of violent situations

A fifth subtype of statements was about violent content as an opportunity for safe exploration of real-world situations that are inaccessible, dangerous, or associated with other undesirable consequences.

> The most beautiful thing about virtual things and art is that you can take different perspectives without any trouble or consequences. That's beautiful. You can just check out this human component. (ID8, 35)

Life-world relevance of violent media content

The second main category, life-world relevance, incorporates different types of statements about practical, self-related implications of the violent media content. Participants discussed how the content related to their own violent experiences or violent experiences of close others. They also thought about the possibility that the kinds of situations depicted could happen to them in real life. This life-world relevance category further includes the special case of interviewees who discussed violent content against the background of their professional experience and expertise, for example, as military or law enforcement personnel. Statements of media professionals and lay people about the possible effects of violent portrayals on audiences were included here as well.

Self-reflection inspired by violent media content

A first subtype of statements in this category dealt with self-reflective thoughts about violence. Some of the interviewees perceived violent media content as an opportunity to reflect upon their own violent experiences, fantasies, and impulses, or they engaged

in hypothetical thinking about how they would react and what they would do if they were in the situation depicted.

> Well, earlier there were smaller gangs where I lived and we had fights … and you think about revenge, but I don't know if there's always a difference between perpetrators and victims. And you start thinking about the consequences of violence. … Or if someone attacks your girlfriend, or slaps her in the face, or attacks your mother, or your pal, or so. Of course you think: How will I react to that? … Of course, you want to protect the people you love, but you can't beat someone down in the street. … That's always a conflict you are in. (ID23, 67)

Participants also discussed the similarities of the characters with their own situation and experiences, reflected upon their own moral conflicts and ethical limits, and thought about their own mortality.

> The character Walter White in *Breaking Bad* fascinates me, because my personal experiences immediately drew me into the story: This is a character of about my age, similar family situation, somehow frustrated, just like I am with my job. (ID14, 34)

> I can understand when he [Walter White] says that sooner or later I will die. I've come to terms with it and now I try to help my family. I can understand that but I am not sure whether I would do the same thing, probably not. I mean whether I would cook meth and sell drugs, I don't think I would do this, but I can understand him. (ID5, 95)

Understanding others' violent experiences

Second, violent content was used as an opportunity to better understand experiences of close others such as family members, friends, or colleagues who have been exposed to violence.

> Like I said, the historical movies are pretty interesting. … My great-grandfather fought in World War II for the Soviet army, he told me stories about it when I was 10 years old. But of course not very much detail, for example how they killed people or so. (ID1, 151)

Professional perspectives on violence

Third, participants discussed violent content in the context of their professional expertise and experience, for example, as military or law enforcement personnel. Interviewees reported that they learned job-relevant information, engaged in critical analysis and evaluation of professional strategies for dealing with violence, thought about professional roles and ethics, and used violent media content to prepare for dangerous situations, or shocking sights and experiences that they might encounter on the job.

> There are lots of documentaries about U.S. military operations and I often think: Okay, I'll watch it to see how they do it. How do they handle things? How do they operate? How many people are involved? What kind of gear do they have? I watch this on purpose. (ID30, 90)

> To be honest, I use this media content to stay empathetic, to know that in serious situations, for which you can't prepare in general, when things become violent that you stay capable of acting. Let's use this SS officer as an example: You should know such extreme situations and you should be ready to intervene, so that such situations won't happen in real life. (ID8, 58)

Analysis of violent portrayals and their possible effects

Fourth, some interviewees discussed the motivations, techniques, and responsibilities of media professionals who create violent portrayals in light of possible positive or negative effects. Participants also elaborated on youth protection issues associated with violent content.

> Probably the director wants viewers to start thinking about violence, and very unpleasant or brutal violence can also trigger such thoughts. And that violent portrayals [do] not necessarily glorify violence just because they are extremely brutal. But in the case of war movies the anti-war message can be more powerful if the full brutal reality of war is shown instead of downplaying it. (ID4, 19)

Psychological and moral implications of violent media content

A third main category of interview statements dealt with the psychological and moral implications of violence for the persons and characters portrayed. For example, participants expressed empathy with the victims of violence, grappled with the motives of perpetrators, or discussed heroes' and anti-heroes' inner conflicts and struggles. This category also extends to complex social constellations, abstract moral lessons derived from the character's experience of violence, and the role of violence as part of the human condition.

Victims' pain and responses

A first subtype of statements about psychological implications was concerned with victims of violence. Participants frequently discussed their empathy with innocent, defenseless victims, specifically children and women. In this context, psychological violence was often characterized as particularly traumatizing for the victims and as more thought-provoking for the viewer than physical violence.

> When there is violence against innocent people, that touches me most. When violence comes for no reason and is against the weak. That's when I can truly freak out. Then I could become violent towards the perpetrator, too. I feel that my inner potential of violence increases. (ID15, 24)

> Well, I think that psychological violence hits you harder, or you're thinking more about it. With physical violence, it's more a spontaneous feeling of shock, probably something that causes nightmares when you watch horror movies. But psychological violence is, of course, because it works more subcutaneously, you have to grapple with it to understand it in the movie and then there is this long aftereffect. (ID24, 46)

Heroes' dilemmas and motivations

Second, with regard to heroic characters, interviewees discussed human virtues and values, including courage, inner strength, mutual support, and keeping faith in times of hardship and challenge. Participants also elaborated on heroes' inner conflicts about the moral justification of violence, and conflicts of self-versus other interest. In some cases, heroes were explicitly mentioned as role models for the virtues they exemplified, and for their ability to solve problems and inner conflicts.

> As a soldier, I think that every soldier watches these war movies. That means that everybody of us knows for example *Saving Private Ryan* or *Black Hawk Down*. These are movies that automatically come to mind. And usually you expect the protagonists to show strength. In these unpredictable situations, in these situations where everything is just too much, to get yourself out of these situations, and to be able to deal with the violence, that's what responsibility is about, so to say. In this German movie *Guardian Angel*, Til Schweiger has done a great job showing this inner conflict and this protective instinct. (ID26, 6)

Complexity of antiheroes

Third, participants discussed antiheroes, that is, morally ambiguous characters with whom they sympathized, although the characters perpetrated unjustified acts of violence. Interviewees elaborated on the inner conflicts, contradictions, and ambiguities of antihero characters as well as on their own moral conflicts about rooting for characters who clearly violated their own ethical principles.

> Or I think of *The Godfather* who puts family first, and commits a lot of murders for the sake of his goals. It really stirred me up that you feel like ultimately what he does is okay. Well, it depends very much on the motive. (ID34, 26)

Motives of villains

Fourth, some interviewees discussed their fascination with evil characters. Statements in this category mostly focused on the cold-bloodedness and arbitrariness of violence perpetrated by villains, and on possible explanations in terms of motives or developmental background that might explain why the character came to be evil.

> What touches me is the mercilessness of the perpetrators. This is what impresses me most, probably. Also violence on the Internet, how merciless the perpetrators are. (ID8, 9)

> I mean, it makes a difference whether it's a serial killer running around killing people by chance or if it's someone with certain values, someone who is blinded by values and thus kills people. If someone like the latter kills people it is, in my opinion, more understandable as compared to someone who fires indiscriminately. (ID7, 26)

Social constellation

Fifth, interviewees discussed more complex social constellations that involve several people and social roles, for example, mixed victim/perpetrator roles, implications of gender and family roles in terms of violence, the passive consent of bystanders who do not act against violence, and positive sides of violence such as fair and respectful struggle, or the role of violence in justice restoration.

> Because the ambiguity of violence is shown. In the character itself, while he is violent, there are many different conflicts, so he can be both victim and perpetrator. (ID2, 40)

> What impresses me is when two women fight against each other, that's not normal for me because of the way I was brought up. But with regard to men, well, as long as they don't die, I don't mind at all. Well, I mean we were raised in the belief that women are the weaker sex and they are not on earth for fighting. (ID1, 68)

Story outcomes and moral lessons

A sixth and final subtype of statements dealt with story outcomes and moral lessons derived from violent content. Participants deliberated about the moral justice or injustice of story outcomes, puzzled over unanswered questions in the narrative, thought back to unexpected acts of violence and other surprising plot twists, and pondered over broader questions of meaning such as the state of our civilization, or whether there is still inherent good in human nature despite so much violence.

> I mean, unjustified violence can in many cases be more thought-provoking. (ID35, 51)

> I think it is good art when questions are answered a little bit. I do not want them to be completely answered. Raising questions is something that everybody is able to do. And it's easy to ask a question. But to give the thoughts of the audience a new direction or to create new solutions for an existing problem, I mean I just thought about it, that's the high art of movies. (ID21, 19)

In addition to the three main categories of statements about reflective thoughts on violent media content, two complementary main categories of statements dealt with characteristics of violent portrayals that interfere with meaning-making. For the sake of brevity, the content of these categories is presented at the main category level, without going into details of the basic categories.

Unrealistic aspects that interfere with meaning-making

When asked about the types of violent portrayals that were unlikely to stimulate reflective thoughts, participants discussed various characteristics that interfered with meaning-making and kept them from taking the content seriously. A common denominator among the statements in this fourth main category was the distancing

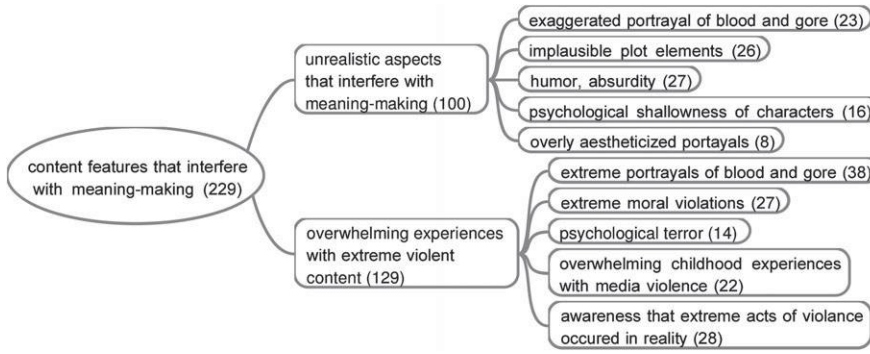

Figure 3 Content features that were incompatible with meaning-making. *Note:* Numbers in parentheses are frequency counts. Categories were counted several times per interview if interviewees made several statements in the same category but in different meaning context (e.g., if statements in the same category were repeated when speaking about different examples of media content).

effect of exaggerated, implausible, or ironic elements that were difficult to reconcile with the perception of violent content as a truthful and reliable representation of reality. For example, interviewees discussed distancing effects of exaggerated blood and gore, implausible plot elements, humor, absurdity, psychological shallowness of characters, and overly aestheticized portrayals.

> Exaggerated violence like in these Tarantino movies, where so much blood splashes around, that's mere entertainment, I don't take these films seriously. (ID38, 31)

> It may sound a little weird, but if violence is too excessive, it can be funny. (ID18, 28)

Perceived lack of realism resulted in emotional disengagement, such that violent content was not taken seriously but perceived as "mere entertainment" (ID11, 34), "you consume it and that's it" (ID3, 8). Moreover, perceived unrealism discouraged participants from wasting their thoughts on content that they perceived as "brainless nonsense" (ID27, 65), or "bullshit" (ID5, 103).

Overwhelming experiences with extreme violent content

The fifth main category likewise dealt with violent content that was incompatible with meaning-making, but the statements were clearly different from the distancing effects of unrealistic content described above. Many interviewees discussed overwhelming experiences with extreme forms of violent portrayals that left them deeply disturbed and confused. Some of the interviewees used the phrase "thought-provoking" as a label for such overwhelming and confusing experiences as well. However, it became apparent from the context that "thought-provoking" was used in a different sense here to describe the aversive experience of unwanted, intrusive thoughts and mental images that the person was unable to control or make sense of. Examples include statements about extreme blood and gore, extreme moral violations, psychological terror, overwhelming childhood experiences with media violence, and awareness that extreme acts of violence occurred in reality.

> When he started with this knife … uh I haven´t realized the situation, because I thought this was a kind of intro, well, yes, and when I realized, okay, he brings the knife to the throat and starts cutting through it … the neck, cuts off the head, and then I turned off, cause my heart was beating so fast I thought, "damn shit." And, probably I have seen things on TV or in the media that were much worse but that is just. … You know this is real, this really happens. And that's something that you simply cannot get your mind around. That's too sick. (ID18, 90)

Such forms of violent content were described as eliciting aversive experiences of extreme physiological arousal (e.g., heart palpitation, sickness), combined with an unfulfilled need for meaning-making, resulting in perceptions of the content as highly aversive, stressful, or even traumatizing. Some interviewees stated that overwhelming and aversive experiences with extreme violent content led them to avoid such content altogether.

Discussion

We began this study by asking what people think about when they appreciate violent media content (RQ1). The results of this study indicate that meaning-making can take a remarkable number of forms. Far from passively consuming violence, interviewees actively engaged with the material in complex, often highly nuanced ways. They elaborated not only on the specific actions of the characters, but also on the characters' social context, histories, backgrounds, and possible future development. They discussed the ways violent content is produced, the producer's intentions, and the possible effects of exposure. They described using violent content with others and the conversations that ensued. Some were self-critical of their own violent impulses (including their vengeful feelings and thoughts while watching violence), hence their own potential for violence. They compared and transferred their insights to their personal or professional lives, to their social network, and to society at large.

These processes tended to be contingent upon the violent content being accepted as a serious and valid representation of social reality. A common pattern of thoughts associated with eudaimonic appreciation in this study was that the media experience was linked to different domains of real-world knowledge. Participants reported that they thought about the *truth value* of violent portrayals, and cared that they learnt factual information about or understood the authentic experience of violent events in history and current affairs. Further, participants thought about the *life-world relevance* of violent media content: They reflected on their own and others' experiences with violence, their own violent impulses, and their strategies for dealing with violence in real life. Finally, participants reported that they used violent media content to better understand the *psychological and moral implications* of violence for the people involved — the suffering of victims, the motives of villains, and the moral conflicts of heroes and antiheroes. They also reflected on broader moral questions about the role of violence in society and human nature.

How can these findings be situated in the ongoing debate over negative effects of exposure to media violence? Most of the research thus far has focused on the potential for harm — hostile, aggressive thoughts and actions, and fearful, distorted perceptions of society. This study does not speak to the prevalence and magnitude of such negative effects. However, it does point to another, underexplored avenue for investigation. As noted in the introduction, research on eudaimonic experiences with other types of media content suggests that viewers' willingness to reflect and engage with the content is associated with a variety of important prosocial outcomes (Bartsch & Schneider, 2014; Oliver, Dillard, et al., 2012; Oliver & Raney, 2011; Oliver et al., 2013). Given the positive effects observed in other contexts, it seems plausible to assume that at least some types of thoughts and meanings discussed by our interviewees might likewise contribute to positive outcomes in the context of media violence. Rather than just adding a positive component to otherwise negative effects, prosocial effects might even act as a buffer against antisocial effects, given their opposite motivational implications for thought and behavior. For example, audiences' empathy with victims of

violence, their admiration for moral behavior in the face of violence, their critical assessment of their own violent impulses, or their evaluation of the truth value of violent portrayals may reduce the likelihood of negative effects. Such an approach would fit well with models of media effects that focus on contingent responses and differential susceptibility (e.g., Slater et al., 2004; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). Specifically, our results point to the potential fruitfulness of examining the buffering function of process variables such as meaning-making and cognitive elaboration — which could help extend the current focus of differential susceptibility research on the possible moderating role of personal predispositions (Ferguson & Olson, 2014; Slater et al., 2004) and the role of aggressive or dehumanizing thoughts as reinforcing mediators (Anderson et al., 2004; Greitemeyer & McLatchie, 2011).

Exploration of buffer effects of reflection and meaning-making might further not only the violence-aggression debate, but also the theoretical and methodological integration of qualitative and quantitative approaches to the study of media violence. As Livingstone (2007) has noted, bridging the divide between quantitative and qualitative approaches is a nontrivial task — given that these approaches have tended to differ not only in terms of research methods but also in their conception of audiences (vulnerable vs. resistant), and their primary objects of research (causal effects vs. meaning contexts). Hence, an important next step would be to make the process of meaning-making amenable to quantitative measurement and to experimental variation, so as to be able to examine causal assumptions about the active and resistant role of audiences as a buffer against negative effects.

For example, with regard to measurement, our findings complement the rather unspecific operationalization of eudaimonic appreciation in Oliver and Bartsch's (2010) scale (e.g., "meaningful," "moving," "thought-provoking") with a qualitatively rich description of typical thoughts and content features associated with eudaimonic experiences. The present findings and related qualitative work (e.g., Hill, 1997; Jørgensen et al., 2015; Schlesinger et al., 1992; Shaw, 2004) allow for the construction of more specific scale items about audience appreciation of violent media content. In addition, items describing the types of violent portrayals that are unlikely to elicit eudaimonic appreciation can be derived. Undoubtedly, such standardized items would oversimplify the complexity of the current results, but they would allow researchers to integrate qualitative insights about audiences' reflective appropriation of violent content with quantitative methods and associated research topics.

Our second research question asked about the types of content features that can encourage or interfere with eudaimonic meaning-making from violent media content (RQ2). Here, our core finding was that the process of reflective appropriation was anything but naive or gullible. Interviewees reported that they evaluated the credibility of sources, and engaged in fact checking, even in the case of fictional content. Moreover, they discussed a variety of cues that they used to filter out violent content that was inappropriate for meaning-making. *Cues to lack of seriousness and realism* included exaggerated, aestheticized, implausible, humorous, and psychologically shallow portrayals. Such cues to unrealism resulted in emotional and cognitive disengagement,

such that interviewees could not take the violent content seriously, and felt unmotivated to waste their thoughts on it.

Although perceived lack of realism disrupted eudaimonic responses, the criteria for realism and meaningfulness varied across participants. Some interviewees mentioned verification procedures akin to journalistic practices, such as fact checking and assessment of source credibility. However, the majority seemed to base their judgments of seriousness and realism on simple affect heuristics such as feeling "moved," "stirred," or "inspired" by the content. This is consistent with prior findings that feeling moved can motivate cognitive elaboration (Bartsch, Kalch, & Oliver, 2014; Oliver & Bartsch, 2010; Oliver & Raney, 2011). Indeed, a recent study of Bartsch and Schneider (2014) found that after viewing a moving film or soft news story (vs. a less moving version), participants were more likely to elaborate, and spent more time reading hard news articles about the topic. Taken together, these findings suggest that affect heuristics may serve as an initial cue to realism and meaningfulness that can prompt further elaboration and fact checking.

Clearly more research is needed to examine lay audiences' elaboration and verification practices for knowledge and meaning derived from different types of violent portrayals such as news versus fiction (e.g., Mares, 1996; Shrum, 2006). For example, cultivation research has found that source information (Mares, 1996; Shrum, 2006) and correspondence to reality (Doob & Macdonald, 1979; Ferguson, 2013) do matter, in that reflective processing of such information can offset cultivation effects. Our findings provide an important complement to this line of research by suggesting that audiences' criteria for differentiating between serious and unserious forms of violent media content are even more complex than simple genre-based distinctions such as fact versus fiction, or news versus entertainment. The qualitative findings suggest a more fine-grained set of reality cues and reflective verification practices that might inform research on audiences' learning from violent media content, and might help explain individuals' differential susceptibility to learning and cultivation effects.

With further regard to RQ2, the processes of reflection and sense-making seem to be limited in the case of *overwhelming experiences with extreme violent content*—including extreme gore, extreme moral violations, and psychological terror, particularly if the events really happened. These types of content were described as eliciting aversive experiences characterized by high arousal and inability to make sense of what they had seen, a pattern that is indicative of failed emotion regulation (Gross & John, 2003; Harrison & Cantor, 1999).

This finding ties in with recent research revisiting the concept of catharsis. While the venting model of catharsis has failed to produce empirical support (Bushman, Baumeister, & Stack, 1999; Geen & Quanty, 1977), recent studies suggest that confronting and contemplating painful thoughts and emotions can lead to positive effects on health and well-being (Bartsch & Hartmann, in press; Khoo & Graham-Engeland, 2014). This broadened concept of catharsis that focuses on emotion regulation via meaning-making rather than via venting has not been applied in the context of media violence so far, but the present findings seem promising in this regard. In particular,

our study helps specify the conditions under which confronting cognitive and affective challenges posed by violent portrayals can result in successful emotion regulation, meaning-making, and well-being—as well as the conditions under which exposure to media violence is simply overwhelming and aversive.

Taken together, we hope that our findings can help inspire further theorizing and research on several unresolved or controversial issues in research on violent media content. Among the issues that might fruitfully be revisited in the context of our qualitative findings are individuals' susceptibility to negative, antisocial effects, the cultivation of mean world beliefs, and the concept of catharsis. A core theme that emerges from this study is that meaning matters, and that it might go quite a long way toward explaining individuals' differential susceptibility to different types of negative effects of media violence. In addition, the findings draw attention to possible positive, prosocial effects of exposure to violent media content such as empathy, self-reflection, and interest in social and political issues. Further, as Weaver (2011) suggested, a richer understanding of the appeals and functions of violent media content may allow producers to appeal to audiences in other ways, rather than simply escalating the degree of gore and bloodshed (see also Bartsch & Mares, 2014). We hope that the insights our interview partners kindly shared with us will help advance media violence research toward these important goals.

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Note

1 The dataset is not available online, because the permission obtained from the Federal Armed Forces to conduct interviews with soldiers was conditional on the confidentiality of the interview transcripts, and the same confidentiality statement was used for all participants.

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