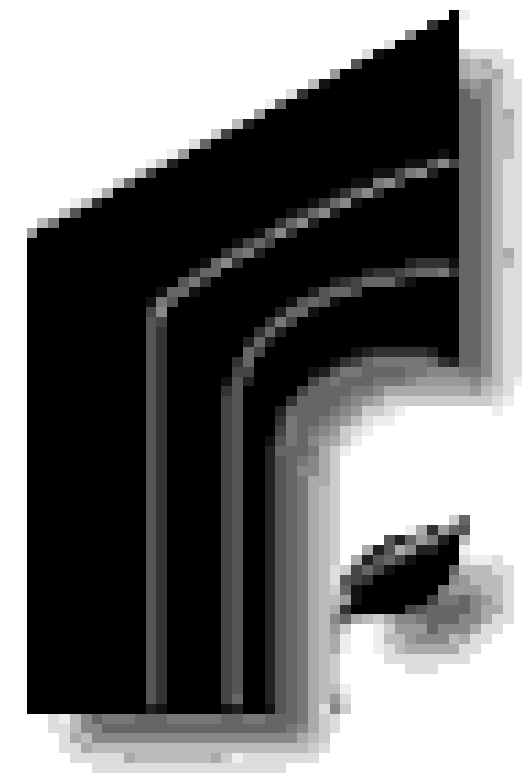
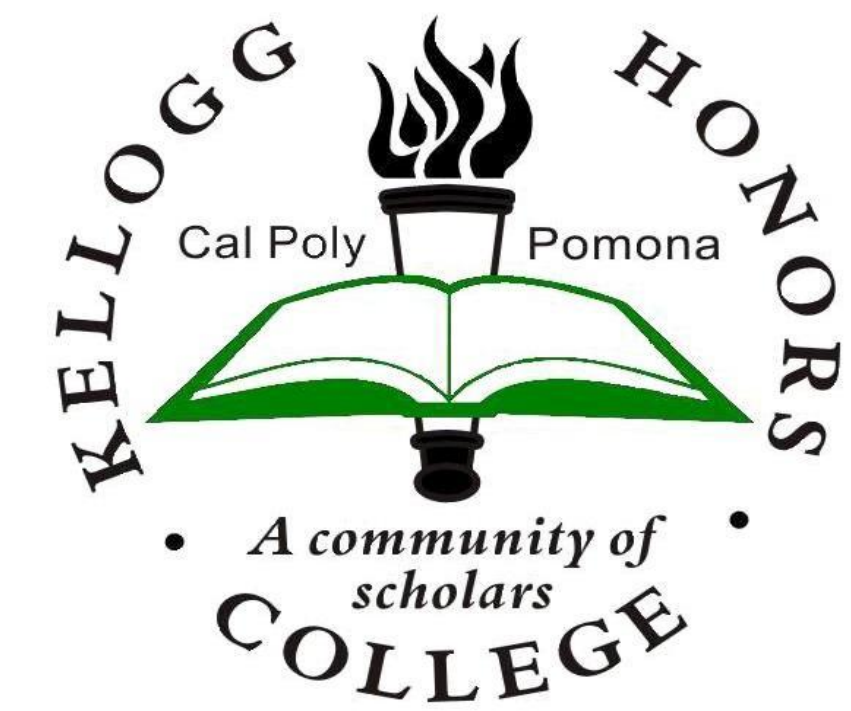


# Music and Catharsis Theory: A Pilot Study



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## INTRODUCTION

Behind every parental advisory label lurks the fear that violent media can cause real-life violence. Violent media are blamed for a variety of activities, ranging from teenage rebellions to mass shootings. However, media effects are complex and inextricable from factors like an individual's genes or environment; it is almost impossible to separate causation from correlation. Violent media can have positive *and* negative consequences. Accordingly, the catharsis theory of media effects\* argues that exposure to violent media can allow people to release their emotions virtually instead of committing real-life violence. There is little research on catharsis theory other than the studies conducted by Dr. Brad J. Bushman. Although his research is primarily psychological, some of it is applicable to the catharsis theory of media effects. The majority of research on media effects focuses on aggressive stimulation theory and attempts to link violent media to aggression. These studies convincingly demonstrate correlation. However, they cannot prove causality and feature several recurring flaws: they dismiss confounding variables, disregard existing preferences for violent media, assess aggressive personality traits instead of immediate emotions, and test subjects' reactions to violent media from a resting state rather than an excited state.

**This capstone project proposes an experiment for studying the catharsis theory of media effects as it relates to aggressive music. It evaluates the experiment's design based on the results of a pilot study.** The experiment investigates whether or not aggressive music can decrease aggression levels for listeners. Furthermore, it examines whether or not a preference for aggressive music influences listeners' responses to aggressive music.

*\*The catharsis theory of media effects argues that exposure to violent media can allow people to release their emotions virtually instead of committing real-life violence, whereas in psychology, catharsis theory suggests that directing violent behavior towards inanimate objects (such as punching a pillow) is a healthy means of releasing aggression.*

## DESIGN

### Independent Variables:

**Music Preference + Aggressive Music**

### Dependent Variable:

**Aggression Levels**

(as measured by the number of aggressive responses to story stems)

### Quasi-Experimental

- The subjects are manipulated, not observed.
- The subjects are not randomly assigned to conditions; music preference is a pre-existing condition and all subjects are exposed to aggressive music.

## PROCEDURE

**9 students between the ages of 18 and 24 participated in the pilot study.** They were recruited from Dr. Ballinger's COM 206, COM 417, and COM 465 courses with the incentive of extra credit.

The subjects were told that they were participating in a study about media consumption and its effects on creative writing – specifically, whether the type and amount of media consumed create a focus on a character's internal thoughts and feelings or external actions during creative writing activities. The subjects signed a consent form accordingly. They were informed that the consent form omitted some details to prevent bias; a belief in catharsis theory can affect behavior, and it is also possible that subjects would report results to favor catharsis theory or their preferred music. The subjects were given ID numbers to use during the study.

The subjects wrote a 1-page paper about a controversial topic. They were told that a group of students in another room was going to read and score their papers. The subjects completed a "Media Consumption Survey," which asked them to list 10 of their favorite TV shows/movies and 10 of their favorite bands. They were also asked categorical questions about the amount of time that they spent using the Internet or watching TV daily, as well as their age and gender. The subjects completed Story Stem #1; they read a story stem and listed 20 things that the character would do or say, think, and feel. The number of aggressive responses indicated baseline aggression levels.

The subjects received false negative scores (1/5) for their papers. The scores were prepared ahead of time and corresponded to ID numbers; nobody actually read or scored the papers. The false negative scores were intended to stimulate aggression. The subjects completed Story Stem #2; they read a story stem and listed 20 things that the character would do or say, think, and feel. The number of aggressive responses indicated stimulated aggression levels.

The subjects listened to "Riot" by Three Days Grace. They were asked if they liked, disliked, or neither liked nor disliked the song. The subjects completed Story Stem #3; they read a story stem and listed 20 things that the character would do or say, think, and feel. The number of aggressive responses indicated post-music aggression levels.

The subjects were asked what they thought the purpose of the experiment was. Next, they were asked if they had knowledge of, belief in, or experience with the catharsis theory of media effects. The subjects were debriefed. They signed a second consent form, which disclosed the true purpose of the experiment.

## REFERENCES

Aspects of the procedure – such as using story stems to measure aggression levels and stimulating aggression by giving an essay a false negative score – were adapted from previous experiments by Dr. Brad J. Bushman. The story stems were previously used in the cited work by Dill and Rule. Further ideas and inspiration were drawn from research by Bruce Johnson and Martin Cloonan.

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3. Bushman, B., & Whitaker, J. (2010). Like a Magnet: Catharsis Beliefs Attract Angry People to Violent Video Games. *Psychological Science, 21*(6), 790-792.
4. Dill, K., Anderson, C., Anderson, K., & Deuser, W. (1997). Effects of Aggressive Personality on Social Expectations and Social Perceptions. *Journal of Research in Personality, 31*(2), 272-292.
5. Johnson, B., & Cloonan, M. (2009). *Dark Side of the Tune: Popular Music and Violence*. Great Britain: Ashgate.
6. Rule, B., Taylor, B., & Dobbs, A. (1987). Priming Effects of Heat on Aggressive Thoughts. *Social Cognition, 5*, 131-143.
7. Three Days Grace. (2006). *Riot*. On *One-X*. Zomba Recording LLC.

## DISCUSSION

### PROCEDURE

- The nature of an aggressive response to a story stem is too subjective to be used as a measurement of aggression levels. Text does not convey a character's tone, and the intended object is not always apparent. Subjects should be asked to distinguish between speech and thoughts. Moreover, it is questionable whether or not the story stem responses accurately indicate aggression levels. Self-reports might be a more reliable method of ascertaining aggression levels.
- The false negative scores do not necessarily stimulate aggression. Some subjects responded as predicted, but others didn't seem to care about expending effort on their papers. During debriefing, other subjects expressed sadness or confessed that they'd doubted their scores. The addition of negative comments would reinforce the negative scores.

### WORDING

- The media consumption survey asked the subjects to list 10 of their favorite "bands." Some subjects were confused; the question should have included "artists" as well. However, artists and bands do not necessarily indicate a preference for aggressive music, because each song has its own mood. Questioning the subjects about 10 of their favorite songs would be more appropriate.
- The story stem instructions were vague because they omitted the word "next." In addition, the first story stem didn't seem as current or relatable as the others. It also lacked the other story stems' obvious aggression-provoking circumstances. The story stems need to be revised.
- Most of the subjects could not list 10 of their favorite TV shows/movies, 10 of their favorite bands, or 20 responses for the story stems. Either the requests are excessive, or the subjects require more time to finish.
- Subjects were allowed to select multiple answers when asked about their knowledge of, belief in, or experience with catharsis theory. However, it needs to be clear that the "none of the above" option is mutually exclusive.

### PRACTICE

- **There were not enough participants to draw conclusions about music and catharsis theory, due to volunteer sampling, insufficient incentives, and inconvenient time slots.**
- "Riot" was played as an mp3 file over laptop speakers. The poor listening quality might have influenced subjects' perception of the song.
- The song's identity shouldn't have been revealed until debriefing.
- The subjects' scores should have been distributed face-up; two subjects didn't see their scores.
- The scores should have been typed or written with more varied handwriting.

**The most successful aspect of the experiment's design was its misleading purpose. Although 2 of the 9 subjects guessed that the experiment involved media effects, none of the subjects suspected that it was related to aggression.**