Appropriate for All Viewing Audiences?  
An Examination of Violent and Sexual Portrayals in Movie Previews Featured on Video Rentals

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A content analysis of movie previews on video rentals was conducted to examine the prevalence of violence and sexuality. The majority of previews contained violence, and these portrayals were common across MPAA ratings (G/PG, PG-13, and R). Sexuality was also prevalent, though less frequent than violence, and most likely to appear in PG-13 and R-rated previews. Rates of aggression in previews were positively associated with increased marketing and distribution costs for the previewed films. Results are discussed in terms of the marketing of violent entertainment to youth and in terms of the use of violence to increase viewers' anticipated enjoyment.

The rapidly changing media landscape has contributed to the omnipresent nature of movies (Litman & Kohl, 1989). Consumers are now able to view motion pictures in a variety of venues, including in the theatre and on network television, videocassette, pay-per view, and digital videodisc, among others. This diversity of entertainment choices is apparently recognized by the motion picture industry, with producers now embarking upon innovative means of marketing movies, such as placement of promotional materials in non-traditional arenas such as shopping malls, ATMs, and the Internet (e.g., Liedtke, 2000; MPA Worldwide Market Research, 2000; Matzer, 1998). Given that viewers report that movie previews or trailers are one of the most important determinants of motion picture selection (Faber & O'Guinn, 1984), it is not surprising that in 1999 an average of approximately $1.6 million per film was spent on movie trailers alone (MPA Worldwide Market Research, 2000).

While the sheer volume of entertainment choices and the accompanying marketing tactics call for a greater exploration of the extent to which media promotion...
affects viewers' entertainment selections, additional concerns have recently been voiced about the nature of the promotion and promotional materials. Specifically, the Federal Trade Commission's (FTC) recent report (2000) concerning the marketing of violent entertainment suggests that not only is violent content a major marketing tool but also that the movie industry systematically targets such content at a young audience (children under 17). In support of this position, the FTC pointed to a variety of data, including marketing reports from motion picture studios, and access of age-restricted entertainment to underage shoppers, among others.

Of course, one implication of the FTC's (2000) report is that the motion picture industry may recognize or believe that some types of portrayals such as violence or sexuality are “successful” in increasing audience interest. As one movie marketer explained, “The objective of nearly every trailer is to get teenage boys' butts into seats . . . And that means going for as much violence and sex as you can jam into 2 1/2 minutes” (Streisand, 1999, p. 56). Consequently, the purpose of the present study was to examine the prevalence and nature of violent and sexual portrayals in motion picture promotional materials by content analyzing movie previews featured on videocassettes. Although video cassettes are obviously only one venue for movie preview placement and may therefore differ somewhat from previews featured in other venues such as the Internet, movie theatres, or television, the use of video rentals offered the benefit of exploring previews that a large number of people have presumably seen. At the same time, it avoided much of the editing of length and content that is likely routinely employed for previews that are shown on television.

Violence and Sexuality in Media Promotion

Although the specific content of movie previews per se has yet to receive much research attention, other studies of related promotion do suggest that violent and sexual content may be commonly portrayed. For example, Soley and Reid (1985) reported that 19.9% of the TV Guide advertisements in their sample contained violence, and 20.8% contained sexuality (see also Williams, 1989). Similarly, Walker (2000) reported a series of content analyses that examined the prevalence of sexual and violent portrayals contained in television promos aired during primetime network television in 1994 and 1998 and during NFL games aired during the 1998-1999 season. Consistent with prior studies, Walker (2000) reported that approximately 20% of the promos contained at least one depiction of aggression or sexuality (see also Sapolsky, Tabarlet, & Kaye, 1996).

Given the prevalence of violent and sexual depictions in television promotional materials, it seems reasonable to expect that motion picture promotion would follow a similar, if not heightened, trend. This is both because television content is likely to contain fewer instances of sexuality and violence within the programs themselves, and because television promos are limited in terms of length. Given the FTC's (2000) recent concern about the marketing of adult material that may be consumed by children, the examination of sexual and violent content in movie previews is a
particularlly important extension of prior research that has explored television content. Consequently, the first research question addressed in this content analysis was

RQ1: What is the prevalence and rate of violent and sexual depictions contained in movie previews?

Although this study regards portrayals in movie previews as one important form of media content, there is also recognition that previews are generally understood to be precursors to the “real” or “actual” media content—the full-length motion picture itself. For example, Eastman, Bradbury, and Nemes (1985) demonstrated that a preview for a motion picture significantly increased the audiences’ expectations of the amount of suspense, suffering, violence, and romance in the film itself. Given these types of expectations, if sex and violence are thought to be “selling points,” then movie previews may overemphasize these types of portrayals (see LaSalle, 1996). On the other hand, movie trailers may try to accurately preview movie content because to do otherwise could lead to negative audience reactions, such as disappointment (if portrayals were expected but not delivered) or indignation (if portrayals were featured but not expected). To examine the extent to which portrayals in movie trailers correlate with other types of information that may also provide viewers with expectations concerning movie content, this study examined associations between violence and sexuality featured in movie trailers with ratings of violence and sexuality contained on two Internet databases. Thus, we asked

RQ2: Is the amount of violence and sexuality in movie previews significantly associated with alternate information concerning the prevalence of violence and sexuality in motion pictures?

MPAA Ratings of Previews and Feature Films

In addition to noting the prevalence of violent and sexual materials used in media promotion, prior researchers have also pointed out that promotional materials differ from other forms of media content in that viewers may be “involuntarily” exposed to the materials (Walker, 2000). For example, Walker argued that viewers cannot select or tune out television promotional advertisements to the same degree as program offerings. Consequently, promotions that feature materials deemed as “inappropriate” for some viewing audiences may be seen by these audiences nevertheless.

This type of concern was also one focus of the FTC’s (2000) report concerning the marketing of violent entertainment to children. Specifically, the FTC argued that the Motion Picture Association of American (MPAA) Advertising Administration is supposed to ensure that all film advertising includes film ratings (G, PG, PG-13, R, NC-17) and that the content of the advertising is appropriate for all age ranges. In addition, the FTC pointed out that that the National Association of Theatre Owners’ 1998 resolution agreed to restrict placement of movie trailers to within one MPAA
rating of the feature film being shown in the theatre. Despite these guidelines, the
FTC's (2000) report concluded that movie trailers routinely feature materials that are
inappropriate for a child audience, and that promotional materials for R-rated movies
are frequently targeted to children younger than 17 years. As Streisand (1999)
argued, even though movie previews are supposed to be edited for a general
audience irrespective of a movie's rating, many parents consider the ratings system
to be a facade since previews of R and NC-17 rated movies precede movies with
lower ratings. Given these concerns, this study also examined the following research
questions:

RQ3: What is the prevalence of violence and sexuality in movie previews as a function
of the MPAA rating of the previewed movie?
RQ4: What is the prevalence of violence and sexuality in movie previews as a function
of the MPAA rating of the feature film that the preview precedes?
RQ5: What percentage of previews for R-rated movies appears on videos for feature films
with MPAA ratings for younger audiences?

Marketing

Obviously, the point of movie promotion is to increase audience interest in seeing
the promoted film. While research has shown that a variety of factors contribute to
increased revenues (e.g., the season a film is released, the number of awards it
receives, etc.), the importance of media promotion to motion picture success is
illustrated not only in terms of audience reports (Faber & O'Guinn, 1984) but also in
terms of the amount of revenue allocated to marketing. Recent figures suggest that
the cost of movie marketing has increased by 400% in the last 15 years, and that a
general rule-of-thumb is to allot approximately 66% of the movie's cost toward
marketing and promotion (see Adams & Lubbers, 2000).

What aspects of promotional materials lead to greater successes? Prior research in
related areas suggests that materials that are perceived as exciting or that increase
anticipation may be most effective (Adams & Lubbers, 2000; Eastman & Bolls, 2000).
In this regard, one would expect that more money would be allocated to promotional
materials that feature such portrayals. However, this line of reasoning implies some
degree of intentionality on the part of movie industry professionals—a claim that is
obviously beyond the boundaries of a content-analytic study. Nevertheless, if this
reasoning is correct, then one would expect to observe a positive relationship
between the prevalence of sex and violence and the amount of money allocated to
marketing and distribution. Of course, such a relationship, if observed, is open to
numerous interpretations; therefore, it should be interpreted with caution and should
only suggest future, more systematic studies of media-industry practices. With these
caveats in mind, this study explored the following, final research question:

RQ6: What is the relationship between prevalence of sex and violence in movie previews
and the amount of money spent on marketing and distribution of the movie?
Method

Sample

The movie previews analyzed were those appearing on a randomly selected sample of videos for films released onto video or appearing on Billboard's top-20 rental charts during 1996. The year 1996 was chosen rather than more recent videos to allow for ample time for financial data of the previewed films featured on the videos to be collected and reported. From this list of 258 unique movie titles, 50 titles were randomly selected, with 47 titles located. The majority of these films were released in the theater during 1995 or 1996 (N = 45), with one film each released in 1993 and 1994. Most of the films in the sample were R-rated (N = 28), 9 films were rated PG-13, 8 were rated PG, and 2 were rated G. Although most films were associated with multiple genres, the most predominant genre in the sample was comedy (N = 21), followed by drama (N = 18), followed by action (N = 12). The adjusted U.S. gross box office revenues for these films ranged from $182,452 to $204,070,714 (M = 39,850,522, SD = 50,288,442).

Unit of Analysis

All movie previews appearing on the sample of 47 videos were content analyzed, though some types of promotional materials were excluded from the study. Among the excluded materials were movie promotions that did not focus on the film itself but on the making of the film (e.g., the animators who created cartoon characters) or on viewers' reactions to the film. Also excluded were duplicate previews and previews that were releases of older films (e.g., Belle du Jour). The resulting sample consisted of 107 movie previews for films with release dates spanning the years 1992 through 1997, with the majority of films (N = 97) released in 1995 or 1996. These previews ranged in length from 23 seconds to 185 seconds (M = 93.66, SD = 42.84).

Coding Scheme

Violence. The number of aggressive scenes was counted within each preview. The definition of aggression was modeled after that employed by the National Television Violence Study (Wilson et al., 1997) and included the overt depiction of animate beings using a credible threat of physical force or the actual use of such force intended to physically harm an animate being or a group of animate beings. Unlike the NTVS definition, the definition employed in this study included only on-screen aggression. However, consistent with the NTVS, only intentional aggression or threats were counted, even if in a humorous context; but the count excluded accidental aggressive acts, sports-related aggression, or acts of nature (e.g., earth-
multiple acts of aggression were counted as separate only if the perpetrators or victims changed within the scene.

Two additional indicators of violence were also coded in this study: explosions and gun scenes. Explosions were operationalized as any scene that featured an explosion due to a car crash, a bomb, etc. Explosions were counted separately only if they were featured in different incidents. Gun scenes were defined as any scene in which a gun was shown within the foreground or within the focus of the frame. Although this definition included instances of aggression (e.g., an individual firing a gun at another person), this definition also included scenes of individuals simply looking at or loading firearms. This broader definition was employed based on prior research suggesting that the mere presence of weapons can cue or prime aggressive responses (Berkowitz, 1990; Carlson, Marcus-Newhall, & Miller, 1990). However, it is important to note that while the presence of a gun or an explosion does not necessarily mean than an aggressive act has occurred, there is clearly a great deal of overlap between these three variables. Consequently, analyses examining violence as a predictor variable included only aggressive scenes (the primary portrayal of interest) rather than all violence indicators.

**Sexuality.** Sexual scenes were defined as scenes in which one or more persons were (a) shown engaging in sexual behaviors (e.g., kissing, petting, initiating or suggesting sexual contact, engaging in intercourse); (b) shown as nude or undressing; (c) shown in revealing or provocative clothing designed to increase sexual appeal, or (d) shown as the object of a sexual gaze. Clearly non-sexual behaviors (e.g., a mother bathing her baby) were not counted as sexual scenes. In addition, prolonged sexual scenes that included multiple cuts but were part of the same incident were counted as only one sexual scene. Given that this definition could include sexual scenes featuring only one person, sexual scenes were coded as either featuring only female characters (one or more female characters), featuring only males, or featuring males and females together. The total number of sexual scenes was calculated by summing these three categories.

**External indicators of sexuality and aggression.** In addition to coding aspects of the movie previews themselves, several additional external indicators of sexual and violent content were also collected. First, MPAA ratings for each of the previewed films were coded. Second, the MPAA ratings of the films featured on the sampled videos were also coded. In other words, if a preview for a film rated as PG was included on a video for a film rated as R, both the MPAA ratings for the previewed film (PG) and the video film (R) were coded. Third, the genre or genres for each previewed film as listed on the Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com) were coded. Finally, indications of the presence and amount of sexual and violent content in the films were gathered from both the Reel.com Internet Web site (www.reel.com) and the Classification and Rating Administration (CARA) Web site (www.filmratings.com). These ratings provide not only alternate forms of information about the prevalence of violence and sexuality in motion pictures but also one general indication of the validity of the coding scheme employed in this study to

assess violence and sexuality. Reel.com is a movie database that presents movie synopses, rental guides, movie reviews, and 10-point rating scales of various characteristics of films, including humor, drama, sexuality, and violence, among others. Violence and sexuality ratings were available for 81 (75.7%) of the previewed films included in the sample. The Web site for CARA provides the MPAA ratings and rationale for ratings arrived at by the film rating board. In this study, dummy codes were employed to indicate the mention of sexuality and violence in the film rating board’s rationale for the indicated MPAA rating. These ratings were available for 100 (93.5%) of the previewed films.

Motion picture marketing and success. Additional information about each previewed film was collected to provide a general indication of the amount of money spent on marketing the films and the negative costs (i.e., budgets) of the films. These data were collected from Showbizdata (www.showbizdata.com), an Internet-based entertainment market research company. From this data base, the negative costs and the print and advertising costs (which reflect all costs to market and distribute a film) were provided for 63 of the previewed films in the sample (58.9%).

Coding Reliability

A graduate student who had been trained in the coding scheme and procedures, with a second graduate student independently coding a random sample of 25 previews to establish reliabilities, coded all of the movie previews. Because all of the coding decisions employed ratio-level data (e.g., number of aggressive scenes), Pearson correlations between coders’ ratings were used as the reliability indicators (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 1998). These indicators showed strong reliabilities for all of the variables coded in the movie previews: aggression (.83), explosions (.90), gun scenes (.96), sexual scenes involving only female characters (.78), sexual scenes involving only male characters (1.0), and sexual scenes involving both male and female characters (.96).

Results

Prevalence of Violence and Sexuality

The first research question concerned the prevalence of violence and sexuality in movie previews. An examination of the average number of violent scenes per minute across all previews showed that aggression was most prevalent ($M = 2.52$, $SD = 3.00$), followed by gun scenes ($M = 2.37$, $SD = 5.20$), and by explosions ($M = 0.83$, $SD = 1.83$). However, all three of these indicators were strongly positively skewed. Consequently, the presence or absence of these indicators was also examined. These analyses showed that 75.7% of the previews contained at least one scene of aggression, 45.8% contained at least one gun scene, and 28.0% contained at least one explosion.
In terms of sexual scenes, the average number of scenes per minute was 1.51 (SD = 2.31). This average was largely accounted for by scenes featuring both males and females (M = 0.93, SD = 1.82), followed by scenes featuring females only (M = 0.52, SD = 1.09), and scenes featuring males only (M = 0.06, SD = 0.25). As with the violence indicators, the number of sexual scenes was strongly positively skewed. However, an examination of the presence or absence of any type of sexual scene showed that 56.0% of the previews contained at least one instance of sexuality.

Association Between Previewed Portrayals and Film Portrayals

The second research question asked whether the amount of violence and sexuality in previews was significantly associated with the amount of violence and sexuality contained within the films being previewed. To explore this question, Spearman correlation coefficients were computed between ratings of film violence and sexuality as reported on Reel.com and Filmmratings.com (CARA), and the rates per minute of aggression, gun scenes, explosions, and sexual scenes in the previews. As Table 1 shows, ratings of sexuality were significantly positively correlated with the previewed rate of sexuality. Similarly, ratings of violence were significantly positively correlated with the previewed rates of the three violence indicators, and they were particularly strong for the rates of aggression and gun scenes. These analyses suggest that previews are consistent with other indicators of the types of portrayals to be expected within the films themselves.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rate per Minute in Previews</th>
<th>Film Ratings at Reel.com</th>
<th>Mention of Sexuality or Violence by CARA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sexuality</td>
<td>Violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggression</td>
<td>.17†</td>
<td>.72***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gun scenes</td>
<td>.19†</td>
<td>.62***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explosions</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.48***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total sexual scenes</td>
<td>.59***</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

†p < .10. **p < .001.

Prevalence of Violence and Sexuality by MPAA Ratings of Previewed Films

The third research question concerned the prevalence of violence and sexuality as a function of the MPAA rating of the previewed film. Within this sample, 4 of the previews were for G-rated films, 20 were for PG-rated films, 21 were for PG-13 rated films, 61 were for R-rated films, and 1 film was unrated. Because of the low numbers
of G-rated and unrated films in the sample, this analysis excluded the one unrated film, and it collapsed G- and PG-rated films into one category representing films rated as appropriate for most children. Chi-square analyses were employed to examine differences between the presence or absence of violence and sexuality indicators, and Kruskal-Wallis tests were employed to examine differences in rates (due to skewness).

Violence. The analysis of the presence of aggression showed that although a slightly larger percentage of previews for R-rated films (83.6%) had at least one instance of aggression than did PG-13 (66.7%) or G/PG-rated films (62.5%), this difference only approached significance ($\chi^2(2, N = 106) = 5.24, p = .07, V^* = .22$). Similarly, while a larger percentage of previews for R-rated films (54.1%) contained at least one gun scene than did PG-13 (36.1%) or G/PG-rated films (29.2%), this difference again only approached significance ($\chi^2(2, N = 106) = 4.87, p = .09, V^* = .21$). The analysis of the presence of explosions also showed no differences between groups, though PG-13 previews were the most likely to feature explosions (G/PG, 20.8%; PG-13, 38.1%; R, 27.9%), ($\chi^2(2, N = 106) = 1.66, p = .44, V^* = .13$).

Although the analyses of the presence of violence showed only slight differences between the three MPAA ratings, the analysis of the rate of violence did reveal significant differences on two of the three indicators. Table 2 reports the average rank and rate per minute of the three indicators; it shows that significant differences were obtained for both aggression and gun scenes. These differences occurred because G/PG-rated videos contained significantly lower rates per minute of aggression and guns scenes than did R-rated previews, with PG-13 previews falling in the middle.

### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Violence Indicator</th>
<th>MPAA Rating of Previewed Film</th>
<th>G/PG</th>
<th>PG-13</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>H</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aggression</td>
<td></td>
<td>41.25, (1.44)</td>
<td>46.69, (1.90)</td>
<td>60.66, (3.16)</td>
<td>8.28*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gun scenes</td>
<td></td>
<td>40.46, (0.26)</td>
<td>50.26, (1.77)</td>
<td>59.75, (3.39)</td>
<td>8.45*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explosions</td>
<td></td>
<td>48.90, (0.49)</td>
<td>58.74, (1.21)</td>
<td>53.51, (0.72)</td>
<td>1.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual scenes</td>
<td></td>
<td>31.85, (0.44)</td>
<td>63.33, (2.16)</td>
<td>58.63, (1.73)</td>
<td>17.15***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. For each variable, numbers in the top row are mean rankings for each rating group; numbers below in parentheses are mean rates per minute. Within rows, mean rankings that share no subscript in common differ at $p < .05$ using Bonferroni post-hoc comparisons.

*p < .05.  **p < .001.
Sexuality. The chi-square analysis of the presence of sexual scenes revealed significant differences between MPAA groups ($\chi^2(2, N = 106) = 20.29, p < .001, V^* = .44$). Bonferroni post-hoc comparisons revealed that previews for G/PG-rated films were significantly less likely to contain sexual portrayals (16.7%) than were previews for PG-13 (71.4%) or R-rated films (67.2%), which did not differ from one another. Similar results were obtained for the Kruskal-Wallis tests of the rate of sexual scenes. As Table 2 shows, the rate of sexual scenes in previews for G/PG-rated films was significantly lower than for PG-13 and R-rated films, which did not differ significantly from one another.

Violence and Sexuality by MPAA Ratings of Feature Films

The fourth research question concerned the prevalence of violence and sexuality in previews as a function of the MPAA rating of the feature film on the video itself. Within this sample, 2 of the previews were on videos for G-rated films, 10 for PG-rated films, 19 for PG-13 rated films, and 76 for R-rated films. Consequently, previews on videos for G- and PG-rated films were collapsed into one category.

Violence. Chi-square tests were employed to examine the presence of violence as a function of the feature films' MPAA ratings. The presence of aggression was most common among previews appearing on videos for R-rated films (81.6%), followed by G/PG-rated films (66.7%), and PG-13 films (57.9%). However, these differences only approached statistical significance ($\chi^2(2, N = 107) = 5.24, p = .07, V^* = .22$). Similarly, no differences were obtained for the presence of gun scenes (G/PG, 33.3%; PG-13, 42.1%; R, 48.7%), ($\chi^2(2, N = 107) = 1.11, p = .57, V^* = .10$), or explosions (PG, 25.0%; PG-13, 31.6%; R, 27.6%), ($\chi^2(2, N = 107) = 0.18, p = .91, V^* = .04$).

A similar pattern was obtained for the analysis of violence rates (see Table 3). The only significant difference obtained was for the rate of aggression. Although post hoc analyses revealed no pair wise differences between ranks, this significant difference was obtained because previews on videos for R-rated films contained the highest rate of aggression, followed by previews on G/PG films, and previews on PG-13 films. No significant differences were obtained for the rates of gun scenes or explosions.

Sexuality. The chi-square analysis of the presence of sexual scenes revealed significant differences between film-ratings groups ($\chi^2(2, N = 107) = 9.21, p < .05, V^* = .29$). Bonferroni post-hoc analyses revealed that previews preceding G/PG-rated films were significantly less likely to contain sexual portrayals (16.7%) than were previews preceding PG-13 films (52.6%) or previews preceding R-rated films (63.2%), which did not differ. Similar patterns were also obtained for the analysis of the rate of sexuality. The bottom of Table 3 shows that previews preceding G/PG-rated films contained significantly fewer sexual scenes than did previews preceding R-rated films, with previews preceding PG-13 films falling in the middle.
Table 3

Mean Ranking of Rate of Violence and Sexuality per Minute by MPAA Rating of Feature Film

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Violence Indicator</th>
<th>G/PG</th>
<th>PG-13</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>H</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aggression</td>
<td>43.42</td>
<td>40.27</td>
<td>59.11</td>
<td>7.23*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1.80)</td>
<td>(1.26)</td>
<td>(2.95)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gun scenes</td>
<td>43.63</td>
<td>49.08</td>
<td>56.87</td>
<td>2.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.68)</td>
<td>(1.15)</td>
<td>(2.94)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explosions</td>
<td>51.96</td>
<td>53.95</td>
<td>54.34</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.46)</td>
<td>(0.58)</td>
<td>(0.85)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual scenes</td>
<td>35.04a</td>
<td>52.13ab</td>
<td>57.46b</td>
<td>6.00*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.72)</td>
<td>(1.27)</td>
<td>(1.70)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. For each variable, numbers in the top row are mean rankings for each rating group; numbers below in parentheses are mean rates per minute. Within rows, mean rankings that share no subscript in common differ at \( p < .05 \) using Bonferroni post-hoc comparisons.

*\( p < .05 \).

MPAA Ratings of Previews and Feature Films

The fifth research question concerned the prevalence with which previews for R-rated films appeared on videos for feature films with MPAA ratings for younger audiences. Because the majority of videos and previews on the videos included in the sample were R-rated, this analysis employed a chi square to compare R-rated materials with materials rated lower than R (G, PG, and PG-13). This analysis revealed a significant association between ratings of movie previews and ratings of the feature films appearing on the videos (\( \chi^2(1, N = 106) = 11.45, p < .01, \chi^2 = .33 \)). While previews for films with ratings lower than R (G, PG, and PG-13) were approximately equally likely to appear on videos for films with R ratings (53.3%) and films with ratings lower than R (46.7%), previews for R-rated films were significantly more likely to appear on reviews for films rated R (83.6%) than on videos for films rated lower than R (16.4%).

Marketing and Gross Revenues

The final research question pertained to the extent to which the rate of violence and sexuality in movie previews was associated with the amount of money spent on marketing and distribution of films. A hierarchical regression was conducted on marketing and distribution costs, with MPAA ratings entered on the first step of the equation, rates of aggression and sexuality entered on the second step of the equation, and the products of aggression and MPAA ratings and sexuality and MPAA
ratings included on the third step as tests for interactions (Cohen & Cohen, 1983). Table 4 shows that marketing and distribution costs were positively associated with negative costs and negatively associated with MPAA ratings (see Sochay, 1994). This analysis also showed that the rate of aggression was positively associated with greater marketing and distribution costs, while the rate of sexuality was a nonsignificant predictor. No interactions between sexuality and aggression with MPAA ratings were obtained.

Table 4
Regression Analysis of Marketing and Distribution Costs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All Films</th>
<th>Violent Genres</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 1</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>.40***</td>
<td>.23*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MPAA rating</td>
<td>-.34**</td>
<td>-.39*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative costs</td>
<td>.56***</td>
<td>.35†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 2</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$ change</td>
<td>.05†</td>
<td>.14†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rate of aggression</td>
<td>.27*</td>
<td>.42*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rate of sexual scenes</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>-.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 3</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$ change</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MPAA X aggression</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>-.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MPAA X sexual scenes</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$N$</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$F$</td>
<td>7.89***</td>
<td>2.37†</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Numbers associated with individual predictor variables are partial correlation coefficients. MPAA ratings were dummy coded as Less than $R = 0$; $R = 1$. †$p < .10$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

One interpretation of the positive association between aggression and marketing costs is that greater advertising is allocated to genres such as action that tend to feature violence. Although this argument remains consistent with the idea that violence receives greater marketing, further analyses were conducted to examine this interpretation. First, based on the genres of the previewed movies, all films that would likely be associated with violence or aggression were coded as "violent genres." These genres included action, adventure, crime, horror, thriller, war, and western ($N = 52$). A Mann-Whitney U-test revealed that the previews for the violent genres contained significantly higher rates of aggression than did the nonviolent genres, $U(N = 107) = 443.50$, $p < .001$. Subsequently, a regression analysis of marketing and distribution costs for the violent genres only was conducted. Table 4
shows that among the violent genres, aggression remained a significant positive predictor of marketing and distribution costs.

**Discussion**

The results of this study confirm the idea that violence and, to a lesser extent, sexuality are common portrayals in previews for motion pictures. Compared to content analyses of television promotions, this study found that 75.7% of movie previews featured violence, and slightly less than half featured one or more gun scenes. Similarly, sexual portrayals were more prevalent in movie previews than in television promos, with more than half of the previews (56.0%) featuring one or more sexual scenes.

Of course, one explanation for the differences between television and motion picture promotion is that motion pictures can be more easily targeted toward an adult audience. However, comparisons between MPAA ratings revealed that materials intended for a younger audience also featured a preponderance of violence, with approximately two thirds of previews for G/PG and PG-13 rated films containing at least one scene of aggression, and approximately one third containing at least one gun scene. The prevalence of violence in previews contained on videos for G/PG, PG-13, and R-rated films showed similar patterns. While previews on R-rated films contained slightly more aggression than did previews on G/PG and PG-13 rated films, more than half of the previews on films for younger audiences contained at least one aggressive scene.

In contrast, the prevalence of sexual scenes showed more distinct differences between MPAA ratings, with sexual scenes less common on materials associated with a younger audience. These results are consistent with previous research suggesting that MPAA ratings reflect greater restrictions of sexual than of violent materials (Leone, 1999), despite a wealth of research showing that violent content holds the greater potential for harm (Wilson, Linz, & Randall, 1990). That is, the results of this study are supportive of Wilson et al.'s (1990) argument that the current MPAA ratings are based more on what might be considered offensive to some people (e.g., sexuality) as opposed to what the preponderance of social scientific research would suggest is more likely to result in harmful effects on viewers (e.g., violent portrayals).

In addition to showing the prevalence of violence in previews, this study also found that while the majority of previews for R-rated movies did appear on videos for R-rated feature films, some R-rated previews did appear on videos rated lower than R. Although recent promises by television networks and movie industry executives to restrict marketing of R-rated materials to younger audiences may address this concern (Carter, 2000; Rosenbaum, 2000), it is unlikely that these changes will affect existing video rental tapes and the promotional materials that they feature. Consequently, future research would benefit from exploring the marketing of R-rated
materials on videos intended for children in the years following the FTC (2000) report.

Finally, the results of this study not only showed that violence is common in movie previews, but that movie previews featuring higher rates of aggression were associated with greater marketing and distribution, even within genres that could be considered violent otherwise. It is important to acknowledge that there are clearly multiple interpretations for the existence of this relationship, and therefore these data should be interpreted with a great deal of caution and recognized as an exploratory first look at how violence may be used as a marketing tool. With this in mind, however, one interpretation is that violent films or previews featuring higher levels of aggression are thought to hold greater promise for financial success, and therefore receive greater support in terms of advertising and distribution. Although this interpretation is at odds with related research showing that violent content is unrelated to or negatively associated with viewers’ enjoyment (Berry, Gray, & Donnerstein, 1999; Diener & DeFour, 1978; Williams, 1989), it is consistent with the idea that violence may be employed to increase perceptions of conflict, tension, or suspense, thereby increasing viewer anticipation that the previewed film will be exciting or, at least, not dull (Diener & Woody, 1981). If this interpretation is correct, one implication is that the marketing of violent entertainment may lead to consumption of violent content, despite the fact that viewers may not find such portrayals particularly gratifying. Hence, the popular belief that “violence sells” may well be an artifact of the fact that violence is what is sold in abundance.

While the results of this study paint a clearer picture of the types of portrayals used to sell motion pictures, there are several limitations that deserve attention. First, given that only previews that appeared on videos were included in the analysis, this sample does not necessarily represent previews that are shown in other venues such as theatres. Consequently, future research would benefit from systematic comparisons between previews shown on videocassettes and previews shown in other venues such as the Internet, where they are particularly available to a wide age-range of potential viewers.

Second, given the sampling techniques employed, the findings reported in this study are based on a relatively small number of previews for non-R-rated films. Although this distribution of MPAA ratings is consistent with the distribution of films released during this time period, these findings should be treated as suggestive, and they would benefit from replication with a larger sample that would allow for a more systematic exploration of the marketing of violent entertainment to youth.

Third, the definitions of violence and aggression employed in this research call for close examination and possible reconsideration by future researchers who may be interested in more closely monitoring the amount and nature of violence included in motion picture promotion. For example, this study examined scenes of aggression and sexuality rather than aggressive or sexual acts in which each slap, punch, kiss, or touch would be counted (see Walker, 2000). These coding definitions meant, therefore, that variations in the types of violence and sexuality were not noted here.
Additionally, gun scenes and explosions were examined, but they were not included by definition into the calculations of aggressive scenes unless there was some actual or intended harm also featured. Ultimately, these limitations suggest that future researchers would benefit from employing more micro-level coding schemes that would capture the volume and nature of sexual and violent acts in a way that likely reflects MPAA rating decisions.

Finally, it cannot be overstated that the examined relationship between preview characteristics and marketing and distribution costs should be interpreted with great caution. Ultimately, explanations for the prevalence of violence in promotional materials are likely best addressed through interviews with the producers of such materials. Similarly, the characteristics in previews that lead to anticipated enjoyment and viewing are areas of research that are likely best explored through experimental methodologies.

Despite these limitations, this study strongly suggests that movie previews present viewers with a condensed story of violence that is likely unparalleled by almost any other type of media content commonly encountered. The effect that these portrayals have on younger and older viewers is an area of research that is ripe for exploration. At present, this research suggests that movie previews unambiguously imply that what is “coming to a theatre near you” is a film filled with images of violence and aggression.

Notes

1 Film ratings are given by the film rating board of the Classification and Ratings Administration (www.filmratings.com). G ratings indicate that the film is appropriate for all viewing audiences, PG ratings indicate that the film may not be suitable for some children, PG-13 ratings indicate that the film may not be appropriate for children under 13 years, R ratings require that minors be accompanied by parents or guardians, and NC-17 ratings indicate that no one aged 17 or younger be admitted for viewing.

2 Because most films were associated with multiple genres, all genres were included as separate variables, and these variables were coded as “mentioned” or “not mentioned” for each film. The genres included action adventure, animation, comedy, crime, documentary, drama, family, fantasy, film-noir, horror, musical, mystery, romance, sci-fi, short, thriller, war, and western.

3 Because rates of aggression, rates of violence, and marketing and distribution costs were positively skewed, logarithmic transformations were employed on these variables before the analyses were conducted (Kruskal, 1968).

References


