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Georgia Southern Researchers Find Violent Media Can Increase Pain Tolerance

FEBRUARY 28, 2011

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Georgia Southern University researchers have confirmed a link between exposure to violent movies and a heightened tolerance to pain — a result that could prove detrimental to young people engaging in risky behavior.

“Violent movies and television programs can increase aggressive tendencies, which often lead to risky behaviors,” said Georgia Southern University adjunct professor Ashley Gowgiel. “With an increased threshold for pain, these people could become severely injured before their level of pain indicates they should stop.”

Gowgiel said these scenarios often make national news. Many involve kids who tried to complete wrestling moves or movie stunts and ultimately sustained critical, if not fatal, injuries. Gowgiel says these findings send an important message about the need for parents to closely monitor children’s viewing habits.

“With media becoming more and more violent, parents must be vigilant about monitoring their children’s media consumption and must be wary about when they are first exposed,” she said. “This study should be expanded to include other means of measuring pain tolerance as well as other ways of measuring and manipulating violent media; however, it is a significant step toward understanding how environmental cues can have a physiological impact.”

Gowgiel said the Georgia Southern University study showed that violent media does have a physiological effect; exposure can dramatically increase one’s threshold for pain. Previous research demonstrates that emotional pain can elicit a numbing effect, both emotionally and physically. Gowgiel, with advisement from psychology professor Will McIntosh, sought to demonstrate a similar connection between the emotional arousal from viewing violent films and physical numbness.

The research team conducted the study with students from introductory psychology courses. Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire about their current and lifetime media consumption then randomly selected to view either a two minute and 19 second violent or nonviolent media clip. After viewing the clip, they completed a questionnaire regarding their interest in the film and were subsequently tested for pain tolerance by holding their hands in ice cold water until they could no longer tolerate it.

Results supported their hypothesis that arousal from exposure to media violence inhibits a person’s ability to feel pain. The study found not only a strong correlation between recent media exposure and increased pain tolerance, but also that early exposure to R-rated movies made the impact even more dramatic. There was a more pronounced change in pain tolerance for those who were exposed to media violence at a very young age with the effect increasing as the age of exposure decreases.

Gowgiel, who teaches psychological statistics at Georgia Southern, recently presented her research to the Society for Personality and Social Psychology. She will soon complete a similar study on sexual media and begin research on the effects of violence in video games.

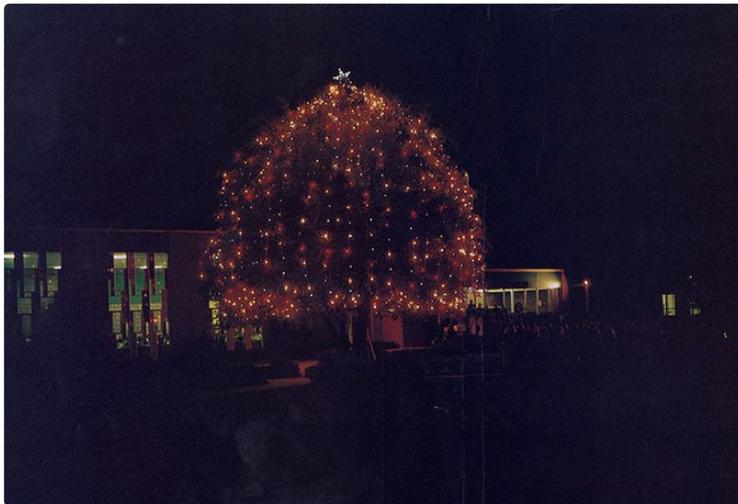
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 "O Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree..." 🎄🎵#TBT to circa 1964, when a tree in front of the Williams Center was decorated for the holidays.



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